

ELISE NOBLE



Blurred
LINES

BLURRED LINES

BLACKSTONE HOUSE

BOOK 1.5

ELISE NOBLE

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The best thing to hold onto in life is each other.

AUDREY HEPBURN

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CHAPTER 1

LAUREN

The forest was beautiful at this time of year. Trees bursting into leaf, birds singing their sweet chorus, deer peeping between the trees before skittering into the undergrowth. I was nothing but a guest in their world. For the past three months, I'd trodden this winding path four times a week as I trained to run the Boston Marathon in memory of my sister. She'd been a keen sportswoman, a track star in college before...before he took her. The Sutherton Strangler. He'd seen her and chosen her and killed her. Almost a year had passed, but the pain was still raw.

A sob welled up as I skirted a fallen branch. I missed Julianna with every breath I took, and knowing I'd never see her again left me with a void in my chest that I'd never fill. Why her? I'd asked the question a thousand times, but nobody had ever been able to give me an answer. Not even the Sutherton Strangler—he'd remained staunchly silent throughout the entire trial.

A bird shot out of a sturdy pine and flew right at me, some kind of raptor with enormous wings and a beak to match. I caught sight of its gleaming yellow eyes as I leapt out of the way,

and saw sky then dirt then sky again as I tumbled down a muddy slope and landed in a heap at the bottom.

Holy crap, that hurt.

Gingerly, I tested each limb in turn, hoping for the best, but when I tried to stand, my left ankle buckled under me as pain radiated through my leg. I couldn't walk. Hell, I could barely even hobble. I was three miles from civilisation with no phone signal, and I'd have to either crawl back to my car or become vulture food.

Unless... Unless I could find help.

There was a cottage a quarter mile away. A tumbledown little shack I'd always assumed was abandoned until the last time I ran past it. That had been a week ago, and I'd seen smoke rising from the chimney. Was anyone home? Would they have a car? The thought of knocking on a stranger's door made my chest seize, but I had to try.

Hopping to the cottage took a half hour, and as I approached, I heard a rhythmic thunk, thunk, thunk coming from the backyard. Someone was home, and better yet, they were outside. As I rounded the corner, I saw him. A giant of a man, worn jeans hanging low on his hips and flannel shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbows. The shirt itself was unbuttoned, and I caught a glimpse of rippling abs as he swung the axe again.

"Uh, excuse me, Mr...."

He looked like a Blaze or a Huck or a Sawyer.

"The name's Flint." He tipped an imaginary hat. "What's a pretty lady like you doing out here alone?"

"Twisting my ankle." It was swelling now, the bump of the bone barely visible beneath taut skin. "I tripped. I don't suppose you could drive me to my car? I'd be happy to pay you for your time."

"Ain't got no vehicle, darlin'. I come out here to get away from the modern world, not to live with a reminder of it right outside the window. But I can carry you back to your car."

"Carry me? But I parked miles away."

That seemed to amuse him.

"You think I'm not strong enough?"

"No, I—" Before I could utter another word, he swung me up into bulging arms as thick as the logs he'd been chopping. The movement was effortless. He could have been picking up a glass of whisky or a bottle of beard oil or a book on how to survive in the wilderness.

"What's your name, darlin'?" He used his spare hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear, and—

Wait, wait, wait... His *spare* hand? Did he have three of the damn things? Okay, so he could have tossed the heroine over his shoulder the way a fireman did, but then her head would have been behind him, not to mention the fact that it was decidedly unromantic. And I was a romance writer. There would be no freaking shoulder tossing, only sexy times, drama, and happily ever afters.

In the real world of Lauren Rossi, I'd only ticked two of those three items off the list. Over the past year, I'd seen

drama galore and made more mistakes with men than I cared to count in search of that mythical beast: the fairy-tale ending. So far, my love life had been more of a tragedy than a romcom.

Over at the counter, Macie, the barista, held up the lumberjack's drink. Or rather, the guy I thought looked like a lumberjack.

“Chad? Your coffee's ready. Latte with”—she checked the order—“soy milk, three pumps of sugar-free vanilla syrup, double non-dairy whip, and caramel drizzle.”

Chad? Soy milk? Way to ruin a fantasy, lady.

And what kind of dumbass would be running through a forest alone if her sister had recently been murdered by a serial killer?

Did raptors even have yellow eyes?

I dropped my pen and sighed. The words just weren't flowing at the moment, not even in my pretty Moleskine notebook. I had approximately seventy-three notebooks sitting in a cupboard at home, most deemed too nice to actually write in, but recently, I'd begun using them—*ruining* them—out of desperation.

“Hey, Lauren,” Macie called. I spent so much of my time at Café au LA that we were on first-name terms now. “You want a panini? Or a salad?”

“Do you have the beetroot-and-quinoa salad?” I asked. “Just kidding. It's definitely a carbs day. Can I get a chipotle chicken grilled cheese?”

“Sure can.”

“Plus an OJ too?”

“And a cupcake?”

“I’d better skip that.”

My half-hearted diet wasn’t going well, and neither was my writing career. This past summer, I’d finally begun selling enough books to reduce my waitressing hours, only for the words to desert me. The plots refused to leave my head, and the characters were alien life forms stuck inside their host. Before, when I’d worked full-time, I used to sneak in a few words here, a paragraph there; hell, I even wrote on my phone during bathroom breaks. Stories had poured out of me. These days, I could sit at my desk for hours, and even when I wasn’t getting distracted by social media, the pages remained stubbornly blank.

But at least I wouldn’t get evicted if I failed to make enough royalties to cover the rent, not anymore. No, through an amazing stroke of luck, I lived in a nicer home than I’d ever dreamed of, and it cost less than the crappy apartment I used to share. Actually, “luck” was the wrong word. My new home came through friendship. Violet Miller, my bestie for the past three years, had accidentally hit the big time in Hollywood, and when she bought Mulberry Cottage, a seventies time warp in Rancho Palos Verdes that desperately needed some TLC, she’d offered me the guesthouse in the backyard if I’d just keep an eye on the place while she was away working. Writer’s block had left me with plenty of time for decorating, and Mulberry Lodge, as we’d named my cute little abode, was

habitable now. Cosy, even, although there was still plenty left to do, especially in the yard-slash-jungle. But weeding could wait.

Three months ago, when I realised I hadn't left home in over a week or picked up a pen either, I'd decided I had to change. And not just my clothes either, although *Glamorize* magazine said that wearing yoga pants more than fifty percent of the time could lead to depression. Okay, and sometimes I'd left my pyjamas on all day. Fine, I admit it; I'd turned into a hot mess. Anyhow, new-and-improved Lauren had adopted Café au LA as her new workspace, partly to avoid distractions but also hoping for inspiration. Each morning, I showered, dressed in non-sportswear and actual shoes, put on enough make-up to hide the dark circles under my eyes, and walked a mile to my quiet corner table.

I figured the exercise earned me cream in my coffee, and slowly, slowly, the words trickled onto the page again. Not a full novel, not yet, just scenes using the people around me as inspiration. Like Chad, the non-lumberjack. I hoped that someday, one of those scenes would spark a story I'd fall in love with, but today wasn't that day. *My sister in Cristal, why would you walk up to a man with a freaking axe?*

Café au LA had become a home away from home now. I'd gotten to know the small group of regulars who used the place as an office—Markus, a finance assistant whose employer had decided to cut costs and close their regional headquarters; Brayden, a copywriter who couldn't focus at home because his neighbour's dog kept barking; Samantha, a social media assistant who felt claustrophobic in the tiny room she rented.

There was usually someone to watch my stuff when I needed to use the bathroom, and I'd always return the favour if anyone asked.

And there were other benefits to working in the café too. My phone pinged.

THEO

Are you free tonight?

For him? Oh, yes, I was definitely free. We'd met nearly two months ago in the line for coffee, him in a button-down shirt and suit pants and me in a maxi dress because my jeans only did up under protest. But none of that had mattered when our eyes met over the last Halloween-themed blueberry muffin—yes, Halloween had already been in full swing at the beginning of September. He'd ordered it, and I must have let out a groan, not so much because I loved blueberries but because I'd sworn to myself that my diet would start That Morning, and now I'd have to order my usual triple chocolate and delay my health kick for another day. Maybe in hindsight, it had been a groan of relief.

“Did you want that muffin?” he'd asked.

“Uh, I think so?”

“You don't sound sure.”

“Yes. Yes, I did want the muffin.”

Blueberries would count as one of my five a day, right? They were a superfood. *Imagine* magazine said so.

“Then you have it.” He turned to the barista. “Can you change my order to a triple chocolate?”

Well, he sure didn’t need to cut down on calories. Theo wasn’t super muscular, but I’d describe him as athletic. The kind of guy with unexpected stamina. And when he decided to eat in and there were no free tables, I’d offered him a seat at mine. We’d started talking. Nothing profound, just small talk and a little about ourselves, but he focused on me, only me, and the way his gaze had lingered—on my face, not my boobs—gave me the warm fuzzies. Theo was a Princeton grad, a software developer who’d moved back home after college because he missed the West Coast vibe.

And the next morning, I heard the magic words as I sipped my coffee.

“Is this seat taken?”

That day, there had been plenty of empty tables.

“It’s yours.”

Theo was sweet. He was funny. And most importantly, he didn’t work in the movie industry. In the past six months, I’d dated an actor, a budding producer, and a writer. The actor had shot his load before the entrée, sliding in a request to meet Violet in the hope that she could give his career a leg up. The producer had at least waited until after dessert. And the writer had been more subtle—it wasn’t until week five that he’d casually brought a printed and bound copy of his latest screenplay along to a baseball game and suggested that perhaps Vi might like to take a look.

They'd used me.

All of them.

Earlier in the year, Vi had gotten caught up in a whole bunch of off-set drama when a crazy stalker fixated on her, and in the aftermath, my picture had ended up on the internet alongside hers, usually with the caption "Violet Miller and friend." But some of the reporters had gone further with *Violet Miller and close friend Lauren Rossi*. Which had led to the inevitable comments... *Violet Miller's best friend writes dirty books*.

In truth, the publicity was a huge boost for my career, but I hadn't gone looking for any of it. And Vi had been as thrilled as I was when the sales of my novels had skyrocketed. I mean, she'd even posted about them on social media. But that was different; I hadn't asked her to. We'd been besties since we were both nobodies, and if this fairy story ended tomorrow, we'd still be hanging out together, eating ramen and snort-laughing at our favourite Netflix comedies. My friendship with Violet wasn't a commodity to be exploited.

But Theo wasn't in showbiz, and therefore that made him safe to date.

So when he'd confessed over coffee that he hadn't been able to stop thinking about me for the whole of the previous day, that he'd come back to Café au LA just in case I was there, of course I'd accepted his invite to dinner.

And three days later, I'd accepted his invite to bed as well. Two satisfying orgasms later, I'd begun to think he might be The One, which was...well, it was a relief. I might have been a

romance novelist, but secretly, I'd started wondering whether the concept of true love was totally fictional. If I hadn't seen how happy Vi was with Dawson, perhaps I'd have quit writing altogether and taken extra waitressing shifts.

ME

I'm totally free tonight.

Life was good, and then it got better. A guy in a suit strolled in, looking as if he'd walked straight off the pages of a CEO/secretary novel. An enemies-to-lovers trope, I bet. With those smouldering eyes, I could just imagine him telling her to bend over his desk and take his dictation. I picked up my pen and began to write...

CHAPTER 2

LAUREN

VIOLET

How was the date with Theo last night?

I texted back three emojis—one eggplant and two sweating faces—then took a sip of my cappuccino. I was back at my favourite table in Café au LA, picking at a bowl of fruit because when Theo bent me over doggy-style last night, I’d had to suck in my stomach so hard that I’d nearly passed out.

VIOLET

When’s the wedding?

I knew she was only joking, but maybe someday I’d get to follow in her footsteps and walk down the aisle? Okay, so Vi and Dawson weren’t actually engaged yet, but everyone knew it was only a matter of time. I suspected he’d pop the question after she settled into her new position as Hollywood royalty. Stardom had happened so fast, so unexpectedly, and she’d confessed that she was still catching up with the new normal,

along with all of its joys and frustrations. Sure, she got offered thousands of bucks to wear branded jewellery, and invitations to events came thick and fast, but last week, she'd had a craving for homemade cake, and three photographers had followed her around the grocery store as she shopped for butter and eggs and cream. By the time she'd finished signing autographs outside the store, it was too late for her to bake a thing.

And then there were the crazies. The most famous of her stalkers was out of the picture now, but that didn't mean there weren't others. Dawson ran her security, and that was a full-time job, not that he complained. Although Vi wasn't the only one who'd attracted unwanted attention lately. For some reason, weirdos thought that my profession as a romance writer who occasionally mentioned body parts meant it was perfectly acceptable to send me photographic examples of their equipment, often accompanied by lousy poetry or lewd suggestions. Why? Why did they do it? Had a woman *ever* messaged back and said, "Hey, I love your junk, and how thoughtful of you to send me a close-up! Wanna meet for hot sex"? I had my doubts. Dawson said dick pics were about control. A way for men to show dominance over a woman who wouldn't give them a second glance in real life. This morning, I'd received a message from Brady in Dallas, who'd told me he was sorry for jacking off while thinking of my boobs. Apology or not, I honestly didn't need to know things like that.

And speaking of dicks, my phone pinged.

KANE

Are you busy next Friday night?

A week from tomorrow... Theo hadn't mentioned going out, although he was fond of arranging dates at the last minute. And I only worked Sundays through Tuesdays at the moment—the extra income from book sales had let me cut the number of shifts I waitressed in half, although I'd never want to quit my part-time job entirely. My *new* part-time job. Waitressing at a private members' club was fun, and a dream compared to the sports bar I used to work in. Not only did I like my boss and colleagues, but hobnobbing with the wealthy folks who frequented Nyx also provided inspiration for my writing. Not that I ever ventured into the sex club in the basement, you understand. But I heard stories...

ME

Why?

KANE

You want tickets to an Indigo Rain concert?

Uh, why was that even a question? Rush Moder was H-O-T. Most women went for the singer, but I had a thing for guitarists. Something about the finger action, maybe.

ME

I could spare the time to go...

KANE

I'll send them over.

By “send them over,” he meant that he’d instruct his PA to ask whoever had offered the tickets to direct them to me instead. Kane wouldn’t come along. He never did, and that was fine. We had a love/hate...well, it wasn’t a relationship, but I sent him memes and he sent me random stuff. Could you call it a friendship? Perhaps. For years, I’d lusted after Kane Sanders, A-list actor and all-around heartthrob, along with every other woman on the planet. But the illusion had been shattered, firstly when Violet told me he kissed like a dead fish, and secondly when I’d overheard him referring to me as her “chubby sidekick.”

In those days, Kane had been a mega asshole as well as a megastar. But what happened to Violet had changed him—it had changed all of us—and when Vi told him how much his words had hurt me, he’d apologised and said he hadn’t meant what he’d said. But that was a lie. *The chubby sidekick*, that had been his first impression of yours truly. And deep down, I knew he spoke the truth, but dieting was freaking hard. Oh, sure, at the time I’d laughed the comment off, the same way I always did—for years, I’d hidden my insecurities behind fake confidence—but I still cried in the bathroom afterward.

Anyhow, Kane had started trying to make up for the faux pas in his own way, initially by asking me out for dinner and then by sending me his excess freebies when I knocked him back. Was that weird? I thought it was weird, but several months ago, he'd confessed that he had no idea how to deal with me. For Kane, the female of the species fell into three categories: family, colleagues, or fuck buddies. Friends were a previously unknown category, so he was having to work things out as he went along. In return, I called him out regularly when he acted like a jackass, and we'd settled into a strange kind of truce.

I sent a message to Theo.

ME

Do you want to go to an Indigo Rain concert next Friday?

Oh, wow. *Gorgeous guy alert*. Yes, yes, I had a boyfriend now, but I also had eyes. And this dude studying the menu board was way out of my league anyway. A six-pack rippling under a tight white V-neck shirt, muscular thighs poorly hidden by faded jeans that looked lived-in rather than artificially distressed, and a sexy-as-hell Adonis belt that disappeared under his waistband. Dark hair, dark eyes. A thin scar on his right cheek took him from hot-boy-next-door to slightly dangerous, and when he caught me staring at him and smiled, he had dimples. *Freaking dimples*. And he probably thought I was a kook.

Dammit.

I looked past him and waved at the next woman in the line. She glanced behind herself, understandably puzzled, but that was okay. Better for *her* to think I'd lost my mind than Mr. I'm-Too-Sexy-for-My-T-Shirt, and it wasn't as if I'd try to strike up a conversation. No, I had words to pen. This was the very reason I came here.

"Yes, Mr. Hotly. I'll arrange that right away."

I turned to leave my new boss's office, but he stopped me with six short words, one tiny sentence with a much bigger meaning.

"We're not done yet, Miss Rossi."

We weren't? But we'd covered every item on the agenda, and he'd been the one to set it. Mr. Hotly wasn't like his predecessor. Mr. Dullard had left the agendas to me. Until last month, my job had been boring and predictable, the two of us arriving each morning at nine o'clock on the dot and leaving at five. Every cent had been accounted for, our roles tightly defined. The business had thrived. Under Mr. Dullard's leadership, VD Enterprises had become California's premier supplier of bathroom sanitary ware with showrooms in nine cities and a busy online store, a suitably uninspired business for a man who'd eaten a cheese-and-pickle sandwich for lunch every single day, washed down with tap water because who needed to pay extra for a bottle?

Mr. Dullard's only rebellion against order had come in his passing, falling as he had from the mezzanine outside his office and landing in an oversized clawfoot bathtub on the floor below.

The dent his head left meant we couldn't even offer the tub as a sale item, a fact I knew would have upset him more than death itself. Write-offs caused him physical pain. I'd seen him clutch at his chest after a pallet of tiles fell off a forklift, although in hindsight, perhaps I should have encouraged him to seek medical help before he suffered the fatal heart attack.

Anyhow, Mr. Dullard's nephew wasn't like his uncle. No, he wasn't a businessman at all, and he knew nothing about vanities, toilets, or anything else bathroom-related. He'd been working as a fitness model when he received the news that he'd inherited VD Enterprises, and now he was here with the rest of us, trying to figure out how to steer a rudderless ship. In jeans. And a T-shirt three sizes too small. At six thirty in the evening. Le sigh. I'd missed my yoga class, not that I'd wanted to go anyway—the amount of Lycra always made me feel inadequate.

"What else can I help you with, Mr. Hotly?"

"There's been some concern about the build quality of the new prefabricated shower stalls. They don't seem to be as strong as the previous model."

"I haven't heard any complaints."

"The quality-control department raised the issue."

"Really? I didn't see that report."

Which was strange because when Mr. Dullard had been in charge, the reports had come to me first to print and bind. He didn't much like reading on a screen. He'd penny-pinched in every way, but we did have an unlimited supply of ink cartridges.

"I need you to help me with some testing downstairs."

"Testing?"

I was a personal assistant. Quality control wasn't a part of my job description. But instead of elaborating, Mr. Hotly led the way to the door.

"After you," he said.

The spot where Mr. Dullard had taken his final swan dive was still roped off, a wilted bouquet bungeed to the broken railing. There'd been an investigation, a hundred questions from the police, but the autopsy had revealed the truth: blocked arteries. He'd stumbled out of his office, no doubt looking for help, and with panic snapping at his heels assisted by its cousin momentum, he'd smashed right through the wood. There'd been talk of ordering a memorial plaque, but nobody was sure if Mr. Dullard would approve of the expenditure. He was still with us in spirit, if not in body.

No, the body belonged to Mr. Hotly, and what a body it was. Rumour said he fought MMA in his spare time, and while I was a hot mess, he was more of an ice cream sundae—cool, lickable, and delicious. Half the women in the office had not-so-secret crushes on him, and as for the other half, they were probably just better at keeping their feelings quiet.

Me included.

Being Mr. Dullard's assistant had been like driving a Chevy: safe, easy, and run-of-the-mill. Now I rode a roller coaster every time I came to work. Without a safety bar. Mr. Hotly was dangerous in every way—to my heart, to my sanity, and if the thin scar that curved across his right cheek was any indication, to every man who dared to get on the wrong side of him.

Stairs or elevator? Stairs or elevator? I usually took the elevator, but Mr. Hotly was a stairs guy. And the idea of being stuck in an enclosed space with all those pheromones...

"We'll take the elevator," he said.

Deep breaths, Lauren.

The showroom had closed for the evening, and as we headed past the tile displays to bathtubs and showers, the last of the sales team waved on his way out the door. I waved back, half wishing I could hightail it out to the parking lot with him. The showroom was a cavernous warehouse, fifteen thousand square feet, but it suddenly felt the size of a sauna and as sweltering as one too.

Okay, I could do this. I knew how to act professional. All I had to do was take notes and draft some kind of complaint to the manufacturer. Mr. Hotly would sign it, and I could go back to arranging his schedule and reviewing the profit-and-loss account.

"What did QC say the problem was?" I asked. "Is it the seals? The fittings?"

Mr. Hotly ran a finger along the edge of the door. "A customer fucked his girlfriend against the wall, and it cracked. I need you to assist me in checking whether that was a one-off."

What? I almost choked on my own tongue. "I-I'm sorry?"

"I've seen the way you look at me, Lauren." He closed the gap between us, heat rolling off him in waves. "The plastic does look flimsier than it should. How long have we been using this supplier?"

"Uh...uh... Supplier?"

"Of the showers, Lauren."

My brain had turned to mush, along with the rest of me. Mr. Hotly was...what? Suggesting we have sex? Right here in the showroom? I opened my mouth to protest, but no sound came out, and the ache between my legs told me I didn't hate the idea as much as I should have.

"This...this is inappropriate. You're my boss, and...and..."

"Are you saying you don't want my dick? All those hours you spent watching me in meetings, you weren't fantasising about how it would feel to have me thrusting inside you, stroking that magic spot over and over until you screamed my name?"

"I..." I couldn't lie; I'd done precisely that. "We shouldn't."

"Why? Are you worried the shareholders might disapprove?" He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me tight against him, and when I felt that hardness, I knew I'd do anything he wanted. "I own the company, Lauren. I own you."

"You own me? I'm not an object. Just because you pay my salary doesn't mean I have to sleep with you."

"No, you'll sleep with me because you want to."

His hand inched up my leg, those clever fingers worming their way under one of the tight pencil skirts I'd started wearing just for him. My thighs clenched, but I didn't ask him to stop. He was right. He was right about everything. I'd dreamed of him kissing me, of him talking filth and screwing me into submission. We'd probably end up breaking an expensive piece of merchandise, but who cared?

When his lips met mine, I gave up on my weak protests. Our tongues duelled in a fire-fuelled clash, lust blazing through me like napalm. Liquid rocket fuel. There was nothing gentle about Mr. Hotly, but that only turned me on more. I didn't have to think or second-guess or wonder if I was doing this right because he arranged me exactly the way he wanted me. And when he finally lifted me against the wall and lowered me slowly onto his steely shaft, all I could do was moan. Speaking was unnecessary. Our bodies did the talking. Even when the wall cracked, I didn't say a word, just clung on as his hips pistoned faster, faster, and—

“Ma’am, is this yours?”

“Huh?”

A teenage boy thrust something in my direction, and without thinking, I held out a hand and took it.

“Uh, no, this isn't...”

But it was too late. He'd vanished out the door, and I was left holding a stranger's billfold, slim black leather, worn but not tatty. I flipped it open, and... Oh. He wasn't called Mr. Hotly. Duh. No, his name was Cristian Garza. He had shorter hair in the picture on his gym membership card, and I wasn't sure which style suited him better, but he still managed to look sexy in the passport-style photo, which was an achievement in itself. The billfold also contained three hundred bucks in cash, but nothing with an address.

“Hey, Lauren, do you want lunch?” Macie asked. She worked shifts as a barista around taking college classes,

although she spent so much time serving customers at Café au LA that I wasn't sure when she managed to sleep. Someday, she wanted to become a social worker.

“Can I get an avocado salad?”

Wait a minute, was all rocket fuel liquid? Or did it come in solid form as well? These details were important.

“Sure. Are you still avoiding cupcakes?”

“Unfortunately. That guy with the abs and the white T-shirt who was here a few minutes ago, is he a regular?”

“The dreamboat?” She made an exaggerated sad face. “I never saw him before. Why? Are you hoping to score a date? I thought you were seeing the app guy? Did you break up? I guess I'm not surprised after what he did to Tera, but I'm real sorry to hear that.”

What was she talking about? Who was Tera? I'd never heard Theo mention that name before, not once.

“The dreamboat dropped his billfold.” I held it up. “What did the app guy do to Tera?”

Macie was already backing away. “Sorry, sorry, forget I said anything. You're happy together and that's what matters, right?”

“Please, just tell me.”

“He broke up with her via WhatsApp, that's all. Said he'd met someone else—I guess he meant you—and it was over.”

“Are you sure?” I'd been on the receiving end of a WhatsApp breakup, and it sucked. “I mean, are you sure it was

the same guy? Theo?”

“Like, ninety percent sure? And at least he broke up with her rather than cheating, so maybe it was a good thing, huh?” A group of customers walked in, and Macie’s relief was palpable. “I should go serve these folks.”

She tripped as she hurried away, and I lurched forward to grab her, but I couldn’t move fast enough. Her head hit the corner of a table as she fell, and she landed with a sickening *thud*. The entire café fell silent for several long seconds before one of the new arrivals leapt forward.

“I’m a nurse. Somebody call an ambulance.”



An hour later, Macie had regained consciousness, thank goodness, and two EMTs had loaded her into the back of an ambulance. Just a precaution, they said, but she had a freaking head injury. Joey, Macie’s colleague, had spoken to Café au LA’s owner, and he’d said to close the place for the rest of the day, so now I was standing on the sidewalk holding a complimentary takeout coffee and Mr. Hotly’s wallet. He hadn’t returned to look for it, so maybe he hadn’t noticed it was missing yet? Should I hand it over to the police? Or try visiting the gym he was a member of? I’d heard of Planet Health—it was *the* place for celebs to train, at least those not rich enough to have a home gym, and the waiting list was over a year long. How did I know that? Because I’d checked

several months back when I was searching for the motivation to shed a few pounds. No, I hadn't found any. Vi did have fitness equipment at Mulberry Cottage, but with only my music playlist for company while she and Dawson were away filming, I'd struggled to force myself onto the treadmill.

Planet Health would have a number for Mr. Hotly, wouldn't they? He might even be there right now—with the amount of muscle he had, the place was probably his second home.

But if I went to the gym, what would happen to Macie? She'd moved to California from Idaho, and I'd never heard her mention a boyfriend or girlfriend. Who would visit her in the hospital? What if she needed more clothes or a toothbrush? Joey had taken my number and promised to call if he heard any news, but I hated the thought of her lying in the emergency room alone.

A quick internet search told me the nearest branch of Planet Health was twenty minutes away in Redondo Beach, so I figured I'd take a quick drive over there. If nobody could help, then I'd turn the wallet in to the LAPD and hope they managed to reunite it with its owner. And after that, I'd head to the hospital to check Macie was all right.

What a crazy freaking day this had been.

My phone pinged.

THEO

I have to work next Friday. Dinner tonight?

Well, that was disappointing. Not the dinner invite, but Theo's Friday-night plans. After Macie's comment about Tera, I might have wondered if he was avoiding me, but he'd already invited me to Thanksgiving dinner at his apartment next month, and he'd even offered to cook. Perhaps I was being paranoid? I mean, if he'd broken up with Tera to date me, he must have feelings, right? The concert tickets had come at short notice, that was all. I was overthinking this.

I'd just find someone else to take to the concert. Hell, I'd go on my own if I had to, because no way would I pass up a chance to see Rush Moder in the flesh.

CHAPTER 3

CRISTIAN

“Cris, there’s a woman downstairs to see you. She says she found your wallet.”

Was it her? The blonde?

“Tell her I’ll be right there.”

Cristian Garza checked the security camera feed from the lobby, and there she was. The curvy beauty he’d considered delaying this afternoon’s meeting to talk to, only to back away when she didn’t look up from the notebook she was frantically writing in. That was when he’d removed the credit cards from his wallet and tossed it under her chair. He’d figured the odds of winning the game were twenty-five percent. Fifty-fifty that she’d find the wallet, and if she did, half a chance that she’d bother to return it. Call it fate, call it a test... If the barista or another customer picked it up, then the spark he’d felt wasn’t destined to become a flame. And if the blonde kept the cash, then he’d had a lucky escape.

Twenty-five percent... He wouldn’t have played those odds in Vegas, but today, he’d taken the risk, and the gamble had paid off. Cris rarely got distracted—in his old job, losing

focus had meant risking death—but this woman had the face of a fucking angel.

As for the meeting, it had gone reasonably well. Terms had been agreed upon with a potential partner for the Planet Health nutrition products he wanted to produce, with just one sticking point: they wanted him to be the male face and body of the range. But he hated the idea of having his picture splashed across billboards all over the city. Models were a dime a dozen in LA—let the marketing team pick someone hungry for the job while Cris stayed in the background. He'd spent his whole life in the shadows, and that was where he wished to remain.

He wasn't budging on that issue.

When he first started Planet Health in the derelict former furniture showroom he'd purchased from a father he'd barely known, he'd never imagined that the brand would take off in the way it did. But online influencers had been attracted by the stripped-back industrial chic—necessary because Cris hadn't been able to afford a proper fit-out—and then the juice bar he'd started because he didn't have time to go elsewhere for lunch had turned into another money spinner. Now there were four branches of Planet Health in California with plans for two more, and Cris could eat wherever he damn well pleased.

Apart from today. Today, he'd been running late, so he'd dashed into a café to grab a sandwich instead of skipping lunch altogether. And that was where he'd caught the angel staring at him, presumably for longer than she'd intended seeing as she'd turned red and quickly pretended to be looking elsewhere when she realised he'd noticed.

And now she was here in his gym, her cheeks still flushed, her smile hesitant. Big blue eyes half-hidden behind thick-rimmed glasses watched his progress across the lobby, and when he got closer, she bit her lip. Hot damn. He should have blown off the meeting altogether. She would have been worth it.

“Hi.” Yeah, she was definitely nervous. Why? Unless she’d stolen the cash from the wallet, there was no need to be. “I found this. Uh, it was in a café. Sorry I didn’t bring it back sooner, but there was an accident, and... Never mind.”

“An accident? What kind of accident? Are you okay?”

“It wasn’t me. The barista tripped and hit her head, and they took her to the hospital. I think maybe I should go there. I mean, I don’t know her that well, but what if she doesn’t have family nearby?”

So the blonde’s twitchiness didn’t come from pilfering cash. No, she’d been shaken up by an emergency, then returned his wallet out of a sense of duty, and now she was exhibiting a delayed response to trauma. He’d seen this before on the battlefield. Thank fuck for his own basic medical training.

“Sit down for a few minutes. Have you eaten today?”

“Eaten? I had three coffees. No...four coffees. But I don’t have time to sit down. I should... Uh, I should go.”

“There’s a juice bar here, and it has a menu of light, healthy snacks available.” Fuck, now he sounded like an infomercial. “Come and eat lunch before you leave.”

“But Macie’s on her own.”

Was Macie the barista? In the absence of additional information, Cris had to assume that she was.

“The doctors will need to evaluate her condition. You can have something to eat in the meantime.”

She didn’t protest when he put a hand on the small of her back and gently steered her toward the juice bar. The server saw him coming and hastily cleared a table near the back, and when Cris pulled out a chair, the blonde slumped into it and bit that lip again.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Lauren.”

“It’s good to meet you, Lauren. I’m—”

“Cristian. I found your billfold, remember?”

Nobody called him by his full name—for years, he’d been Cris or “Hey, asshole”—but he liked the sound of it coming from her lips.

“Yeah, Cristian.”

“I’m sorry I interrupted your workout.” She looked him up and down, taking in the jeans and T-shirt that were his outfit of choice. Suits made him feel uncomfortable. He owned one, a single-breasted Brioni, but he only wore it to funerals, and he’d been to too many of those. “Or did you already finish?”

“I’ll hit the gym later.”

Now what was he meant to say? Dropping his wallet had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, and Cris hadn’t exactly

thought this through. Nor had he dated in years, not since before his divorce, although this definitely wasn't a date. It was just lunch. And he didn't do deep and meaningful conversations. Work took priority right now, and hook-ups were his limit. But something about Lauren had caught his eye, he couldn't deny that, even though she wasn't his usual type. His fuck buddies tended to be vain ice queens more interested in themselves than in him. No risk of commitment, no risk of heartbreak.

“So, what's good here?” Lauren gave a nervous giggle. “To eat, I mean. On the menu.”

“How hungry are you?”

“Freaking starving, but I'm on a diet.” She glanced down at herself, and those cheeks turned pink again. “Not much of one, huh?”

Cris wanted to tell her not to apologise for herself, that she was beautiful just as she was, but he was worried he'd sound like a sleaze. With her looks, men probably hit on her all the time.

“Who are you trying to lose weight for?” he asked.

“I don't understand?”

“For yourself, or for society?”

“For...” she started, then paused, and Cris knew it was a question she'd never truly considered. Which meant she dieted due to peer pressure. Which was why she was struggling. “I guess I just want to fit in.”

“Fitting into society is overrated.”

He'd learned that during his stint in the Marines, where he'd been one tiny cog in a vast machine. Or an annoying piece of grit, if you were to ask one or two of his commanding officers. He had the bad habit of speaking out when he felt it was necessary. There'd been times when he'd wanted to rebel against the whole damn system, but he'd put in eight years before he quit. It had felt like longer. Most days, he still missed his brothers-in-arms, but he didn't miss some of the shit that had come with the job. Okay, so he still had to deal with bull in the private sector, but it was a different type of crap. Fuckin' ad campaigns...

"But fitting into my clothes is necessary," Lauren said. "Everything's getting tight, and I thought that losing weight would be easier than buying a whole new wardrobe that I can't afford anyway. I'm a comfort eater, I'm not ashamed to admit it—hello, my name is Lauren Rossi and I eat potato chips when I'm miserable—but now I have a job I enjoy, two jobs actually, and a proper home, good friends, a steady boyfriend... I guess I just like muffins too much. And now I'm rambling." She smacked her forehead. "Sorry."

A steady boyfriend? Well, fuck. That was disappointing. Not surprising, but disappointing. Lauren Rossi made Cris's dick twitch, a visceral reaction he couldn't control, but if she was already taken, he couldn't ask her out for dinner. Or kiss those plump lips. Or throw her over a weight bench and fuck her senseless. He should have been relieved.

But he wasn't.

He tapped the menu. “Try an apple-and-blueberry muffin. The recipe uses applesauce to replace some of the fat.”

“Now you’re a muffin expert?”

“I test and approve every item we serve.”

Her eyes widened. “Wait, you work here? I thought you just had a membership. Are you a chef? Or a shift supervisor?”

“No, I own the place.”

“Oh.” Now she gave him a more thorough inspection, head to toe, trying to be subtle but not succeeding. “I bet you test every piece of equipment too. Thoroughly.”

An unexpected laugh burst out of him. “I do.”

“Okay, I’ll try the apple-and-blueberry muffin.”

“Try the equipment as well if you want to, but make sure you’re doing it for the right reasons.”

Access to on-trend exercise classes and the best cardio and weight machines that money could buy meant nothing if a person didn’t have the right motivation. And that motivation came from within. Every coach at Planet Health was trained to nurture those tiny seeds of self-belief until they blossomed—that was the key to the business’s success, not the funky aesthetic or the fancy spa. Cris prided himself on achieving the best staff-to-client ratio in the city.

“I heard there was a waiting list.”

“There is, but not for you. I’ll gift you a year’s membership. It’s the least I can do after you returned my wallet.”

Cris knew how to play the long game. If Lauren was still with the boyfriend after a year, then Lady Luck wasn't on his side. Not the way she had been that day in Afghanistan when a bullet had missed him by half an inch. Or the time in Libya when he'd driven cautiously down a rutted track, only to watch in the mirror as the vehicle behind detonated an IED. Those memories still haunted him, but if he let them take over, then the enemy would score a late victory.

"No way," Lauren said. "A year's membership? That's too much."

He shrugged. "If you want to use it, then use it. If you don't, then don't."

Did he want her to come? Yes, all over his dick. *Fuck, man, inappropriate.* To the gym. Did he want her to come *to the gym*? In truth, Cris was undecided. In the space of a few hours, Lauren Rossi had worked her way under his skin, but seeing her every week without being able to have her might just kill him. On the other hand, not seeing her at all would be worse.

"Honestly, a muffin is plenty enough of a reward."

"Then I'll throw in a tab at the juice bar too. Come for the free muffins, stay for the spa."

"Are you always this impossible?"

"So I've been told."

Frequently.

Tessie, his ex, had married Cris when he was on active duty as a US Marine and then complained when he wasn't

home to eat dinner every night. Three years later, their relationship had degenerated into sex and arguments, and a year after that, just the arguments. Turned out Tessie was getting the sex from a neighbour. The kid had been that motherfucker's too, the daughter Cris had raised as his own for two years and now wasn't allowed to see. Was he bitter? Of course he was bitter. But a little of the ice in his cold, hard heart had melted today when Lauren fixed her gaze on him as he waited for lunch. He'd felt the shift.

Had she?

It was her turn to shrug. "Maybe I'll come."

CHAPTER 4

LAUREN

A month later...

Some things changed, some things stayed the same.

“You want lunch, Lauren?” Macie asked.

I was still writing in Café au LA, but not as often. The juice bar at Planet Health yielded twice as much eye candy for half the calories, and the low-fat muffins were surprisingly tasty. I’d lost seven pounds. Seven freaking pounds in a month!

The first day I walked into Planet Health, I’d been the new kid in school, hoping for the best but secretly waiting to get bullied. I wasn’t a skinny Instagram influencer or a trust fund kid. I didn’t belong there. But Cristian had gifted me something more than an expensive membership at an exclusive gym. He’d given me hope, and I couldn’t afford to pass that up.

The coaches at Planet Health were fantastic. I’d tried joining a gym once before, but after the initial introductory session, you were on your own unless you could afford to pay

extra for personal training. But in the Health Zone, I'd been assigned a personal coach I could call or email for advice, plus there was constant support from the other staff on shift. I'd even tried a kickboxing class and nobody had laughed at me. Better yet, strapping on a pair of boxing gloves and punching a heavy bag had been super satisfying. *Thwack, thwack, thwack.* I'd just imagined it was my primo online stalker's genitals.

Thwack.

And now I could fit into my jeans again. Only just, but the button did up, so I was taking that as a win.

"I'll have the chicken salad with low-fat mayo."

"Coming right up."

I might have stopped visiting Café au LA altogether if it hadn't been for Macie. She'd become a friend now. We'd bonded during the two days she'd spent in the hospital while the doctors monitored her concussion, and then she'd swallowed a handful of headache pills and shrieked alongside me at the Indigo Rain concert, although she wasn't a Rush Moder fangirl. No, she had a crush on Dexter Reeves, the bass guitarist. He always seemed a bit grouchy to me, but she said she went for the moody, creative type. Her downfall, apparently, because grumpy artists made terrible boyfriends.

As for app developers, they made good boyfriends. My relationship with Theo was settling into the next phase, where the sex was fun but not rabid and we'd rearranged parts of our lives to make space for each other. On Wednesday evenings, we went out for dinner, and then I stayed at his place. On Thursdays, we cooked. Or rather, Theo cooked. He was a

control freak in the kitchen, even if it was *my* kitchen. Last week, he'd come over to Mulberry Lodge for the first time, and he hadn't even asked who lived in the main house, which was another point in his favour. Things were comfortable. A part of me wondered whether "comfortable" would be enough for the long term—Violet and Dawson had been together for nearly a year, and he still looked at her like he wanted to rip off her clothes—but this was my first real relationship, and I was still getting used to being part of an "us." For now, I was happy.

And in time, maybe I'd cut down my waitressing hours further to spend more time with Theo, because the words were finally flowing. In the past week, I'd added five chapters to my new book. *The Ex Files* was a sexy romcom about a California girl who rented herself out as a fake girlfriend for weddings, parties, and funerals, with plenty of drama along the way. My publishing plans were back on track, even if Theo thought my habit of writing grubby scenes longhand in a cute notebook was weird. Not that I'd let him read any of my rough drafts—they were my private thoughts, unedited, full of typos, and definitely not for public consumption. But they were also building blocks, the foundations of future stories. The jigsaw pieces I needed to be an author.

Right now, there wasn't a thing I'd change about my life.

My phone pinged.

Okay, there was *one* thing.

If I were a man and my dick looked like that, I wouldn't send pictures of it to women I didn't know, but this jerk clearly

had no shame. Today, he was called John Hopkins. Yesterday, he'd been Eric Edwards, and the day before, Danny Skagger. It was definitely the same guy. His dick was shaped like a mushroom and weirdly purple, plus he had a mole just above it with hair sprouting from the top. He'd never heard of a razor either, and from the salt-and-pepper pubes, I guessed he must be middle-aged. Yeuch. As fast as I could block him, he created new social media accounts, and I wished I could close my messages completely, but readers needed to be able to contact me.

Delete.

Block.

Tomorrow, he'd be back. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, email, he used them all, although he hadn't mastered TikTok yet. He claimed to be my biggest fan, but he definitely wasn't. Not in any way. In my head, I'd christened him Mario because of the mushroom thing, although there was definitely nothing super about him. Dawson's friend Alexa, who was a super-geek, had tried to track him down, but he was careful, and he used a VPN to block his location. His profile pictures were lifted from other sites on the internet, and sometimes his fake names too. All I could do was watch my back. Theo said Mario was just a sad, harmless loser, and I really hoped he was right.

“Here you go.” Macie slid a plate onto the table beside me. “One chicken salad, and I added some toasted pumpkin seeds.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to the gym this afternoon?”

It was a Monday, so yes. I took Thursdays and Sundays off. Tuesdays and Saturdays were my juice bar mornings—or Nutrition Zone mornings, as the juice bar was officially called—and I’d worked out that there was a staff meeting on Tuesdays at eleven a.m. sharp. Cristian always showed up for that. Catching a glimpse of him was a guilty pleasure, a tiny indulgence I’d never admit to enjoying, like profiteroles for breakfast or cocktails for lunch. I had a boyfriend. Cristian probably had a girlfriend. But for the same reason that I had a Firefighters ’n’ Puppies calendar on my desk, I liked to look at pretty men in the gym. Call it research, call it professional curiosity. When Cristian was working out, he swapped the jeans for shorts, and he definitely didn’t skip leg day. My notebook was filled with scenes starring Mr. Hotly. This exercise thing was proving to be more enjoyable than I’d ever imagined.

“Yup, I’m going to the gym this afternoon. Do you have any time off this week? Want to get brunch?”

With Violet away so much at the moment, I’d found myself growing a little lonely, especially on days when Theo was working, which seemed to be most of them. I admired his dedication, don’t get me wrong, but there were times when I wished he paid more attention to me than to his phone.

“I can do Friday or Sunday?” Macie said. “Not Saturday, though. I’m covering a shift for Mandi on Saturday.”

“Friday works.”

Macie grinned. “It’s a date.”



“Keep your back straight.”

I'd know that voice anywhere. Cristian's words were followed by a brush of his hand that came dangerously close to my ass, and I nearly dropped the barbell onto my toe. Fortunately, it missed, and he stopped it with a foot before it rolled away. *Damn these sweaty palms.* My Wednesday-morning gym session had suddenly become a whole lot hotter.

“Apologies, I didn't mean to make you jump.”

“It's okay,” I assured him. “I'm still getting used to this.”

What was my problem? I'd never lost my mind over a man before, and thanks to Violet, I'd hung out with half of Hollywood now. Kane Sanders was objectively hot, but I hadn't gone gaga over him, had I? Cristian Garza gave off some weird kind of pheromones that turned my brain to mush. I half wished he'd say something rude or hurtful so I could write him off as a jackass and push him out of my headspace.

But, of course, he didn't.

No, he studied me slowly, from my head to my toes and back again. It felt as though he were peeling off my clothes with his gaze. I'd worn leggings with a loose T-shirt to cover up my bulgy bits, but now I felt naked.

“You've lost weight,” he said finally. “Seven pounds? Eight?”

“You can tell?”

Theo hadn't said a word, even though he knew I'd joined a gym.

“It's my job to tell. You're getting stronger too.”

“You think?”

“Last week, you had thirty pounds on the bar. Today, you have thirty-two.”

“How do you know that? We haven't spoken in a month.”

Since the day I'd found his wallet, in fact.

Cristian pointed upward to a mirrored window near the double-height ceiling. “That's my office.”

“So you've been spying on me?”

“I watch everything. It's my...”

“...job,” I finished.

“That's right.” He took a seat on a nearby weight bench. “I wasn't sure you'd come back.”

“I wasn't sure I'd come back either.”

“So why are you here?” he asked, patting the bench beside him. “Take a break.”

“I guess... I guess you gifted me a chance to change, and it was now or never.”

Against my better judgment, I sat. Cristian made my pulse race faster than the treadmill did. Not that I ran very fast right now, but one day, I hoped I'd manage a mile without dying.

“Did you get set up with your coach?” he asked.

“Yes, Kelli. She’s been great. She planned out five sessions a week for me, three with a focus on cardio and two with weights.”

“If it’s weight loss you’re looking for, then ask her to put together a meal plan as well. Kelli’s also a certified nutritionist.” I’d set my phone on the end of the bench, and Cristian glanced down when it buzzed. “Mushrooms are a good start. They’re packed full of protein, fibre, and antioxidants.”

“I don’t actually like mushrooms.”

“Really? Then who just sent you a picture of one with the caption ‘Are you hungry?’ and a heart-eyes emoji?”

The first thing that fell out of my mouth was “Do you always read people’s private messages?” And the second, as my mind caught up with his words? “Oh, hell.”

I scrambled for my phone, one hand landing on Cristian’s well-muscled thigh in the process. Dammit, this wasn’t a message via social media. Somehow, Mario had gotten my freaking phone number, and now pictures of his anatomy had invaded my text messages, my last bastion of digital safety.

“It just came up in the notifications. What’s the problem? Do you have a fungus phobia?”

“You mean mycophobia. And no, it’s not a mushroom.”

Now he peered across for a better look. I, on the other hand, had already seen quite enough close-ups of Mario’s dwarf puffball.

“Who the fuck sent you this? Not your boyfriend?”

“Eew, no.”

“An ex?”

“I don’t know who he is or how he got my number. He usually messages me via social media.”

“This has happened more than once?”

“I’ve lost count of the number of times.”

“All the same guy?”

“Mostly.”

“Mostly? Lauren, this isn’t okay. How long has he been messaging you?”

“For months.”

“Have you reported it?”

“To who? The police? My friend got stalked by some weirdo, and they didn’t take it seriously until the situation escalated drastically.”

“Escalated drastically? Could it be the same guy?”

“No, it definitely isn’t.”

“What’s your security like at home? Do you live with your boyfriend?”

I shook my head. “No. I mean, I stay at his place sometimes, but I live alone. I have an alarm, though, and security lights, and two good friends live right next door. Except they’re away in the Caribbean at the moment because Vi has to work, and Dawson always goes with her.”

Aaaaand I was rambling again. Cristian Garza scrambled my thoughts, but my mouth just kept going and going of its own accord.

“Make sure the alarm’s set every night, and if you feel worried, call the cops. Or me.”

“I don’t have your number.”

“Give me your phone.”

Was he always this bossy? And was it bad that I liked it? Immediately after I’d had that thought, the guilt hit. Cristian was...well, not even a friend. He was a guy I’d shared two conversations with, one of which was about a pervert. If I called anyone, it should be Theo.

But now I had Cristian’s number, and even though I never planned to make use of it, I couldn’t bring myself to delete it either.

CHAPTER 5

LAUREN

Where had all the pens gone? The stacks of paper? The “Like a Boss” coffee mug that always sat beside Mr. Hotly’s laptop? Ever since he’d taken over the company, his desk had been a hotbed of clutter, but this morning, the polished wood surface was clear apart from his phone.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Take a seat, Ms. Rossi.”

“Of course.”

But when I began to lower my ass into the visitor’s chair, Mr. Hotly shook his head.

“Not there.” He tapped the desk with one authoritative finger. “Here. Did you get my memo about the change in dress code?”

The one forbidding the PA to the CEO from wearing panties? Yes, I’d gotten it. I nodded.

“And did you follow the rules? Or do I have to discipline you?”

“I followed the rules.”

Although a part of me wished I hadn't. What would the crack of Mr. Hotly's hand on my ass feel like? I took a seat as instructed, and my legs parted as he lifted my feet onto his thighs. Strong hands inched my skirt up, silk over sweaty skin, and I held my breath, waiting. Would he appreciate my little surprise?

I knew the moment he saw it. His smouldering gaze rose to meet mine, and he licked his lips.

"Thank you for the gift certificate, sir."

When I turned twenty-six last week, he'd bought me a five-hundred-dollar spa voucher. I'd never had a Brazilian wax before, and having every hair ripped out had stung like hell, but I'd wanted to thank him for his generosity.

"It was worth every cent."

My back arched as he buried his face between my legs, and I had to bite my lip when he slowly licked me, paying particular attention to my clit, circling that tight bud with the tip of his tongue as I moaned. My spike heels dug into his thighs, but when I tried to move them to somewhere more comfortable, he held me still.

"Don't."

"But—"

"Your mouth is for my cock, Lauren, not for making pointless protests."

"Then give it to me. Let me taste you."

"Not yet. You're honey and lust and about to be fucked."

On his desk? But he had a meeting at—

“Lauren, how spicy do you like your tacos?” Theo called through the living room doorway.

Damn. Train of thought: lost.

“Uh, medium spicy? A bit of a kick, but not enough to blow my head off.”

Theo had taken over the kitchen again. Mulberry Lodge was bigger than his apartment, so he'd stayed with me last night, and today, he'd borrowed my dining room to work, spreading his papers out on the table along with two laptops and endless cups of black coffee. I'd cleared a drawer and some closet space for him, bought his favourite brand of coffee beans, and given him a key along with strict instructions to arm the security system every time he left. I needed to stay safe. The messages from Mario were arriving daily now, mostly to my phone but also to my social media accounts. And while the photos might have been gross, the words creeped me out more. The crude suggestions were becoming increasingly personal. Mario had clearly read all of my books, and now he'd begun inserting my face into porn scenes reminiscent of paragraphs I'd written. Me on my knees in front of a leather-clad biker. Me riding a sexy cowboy in a pile of hay. Me joining the mile-high club with the pilot of a private jet.

Alexa said Mario was using deepfake AI software, but so far, she'd only managed to track him as far as LA. He was close, but I didn't know who he was. Or where. He could be a

former colleague, or a neighbour, or even someone I considered a friend. The thought made me sick.

“Dinner will be ready in five minutes,” Theo announced.

“I’ll set the table.”

I tucked my laptop back into its case and headed into the kitchen to get plates and napkins. And cutlery, because Theo liked to eat his tacos with a knife and fork.

“Actually, make it ten minutes. Mind if I do my laundry here?”

“You know where the laundry soap is?”

“I found it under the sink. Do you have anything else that needs to go into the hamper?”

So, this was what a relationship was like. Splitting chores, sharing space, learning more about each other’s likes and dislikes. Vi said that for her, the change had been natural, like putting on a pair of new shoes and finding out they fit perfectly, no pinched toes or rubbed heels. She and Dawson had just clicked. Me? I was still at the walking-around-in-the-store stage. Having a man in my home felt weird. How was I meant to get Theo to put the toilet seat down? Should I keep reminding him? Make a cute little sign? Or simply carry on doing it myself and hope he eventually got the hint? And what about changing the toilet roll? The one time he’d managed that particular task, he’d hung the paper down the back, which was sacrilegious.

“No, nothing else for the hamper.”

“Where’s the clothes dryer? I couldn’t find it.”

“I don’t have a clothes dryer. If I need to wear things in a hurry, I hang them on the radiator.”

“You think my underwear will dry by the morning?”

“You’ve run out of clean underwear?”

“No, but I need two weeks’ worth for my trip to San Francisco, so I have to wash everything.”

What the hell? “What trip to San Francisco?”

“I thought I told you?”

“You definitely didn’t.”

“Really?” Theo glanced over his shoulder, spatula in hand. “I could have sworn I did.”

“I certainly would have remembered.”

“It’s for work. I have meetings set up with potential investors for the next round of funding. Can I use your printer? I need to take hard copies of the presentations to hand out.”

“Uh, yes. Yes, of course. But...but you said you’d spend more time here.”

“And I will. When I get back from San Francisco, I’m yours for the next few months.” Theo held out a spoonful of ground beef. “Try this—is it spicy enough?”

My appetite had completely deserted me, but I tasted the sample anyway. “It’s fine. What about the weirdo who keeps sending messages? He’s really creeping me out, and Vi and Dawson aren’t back for another five weeks.”

“It’s just some crank, sweetheart. He probably never leaves his mom’s basement.”

“He has my number. What if he has my address too?”

“You have a great security system. If you’re worried, call the cops—that’s what they’re there for.” Theo’s voice softened. “And I’ll call you every morning and evening, I promise. If this wasn’t important, I wouldn’t go.”

In the space of five minutes, our drunk-on-lust phase had ended and we’d moved on to the next step of our relationship—the hangover. I’d known this would happen—I’d read enough books on relationships as part of my literary research to understand it was inevitable—but secretly, I’d hoped the fun parts would last a little longer. I mean, would it really have been so difficult to share his schedule a week earlier?

No.

No, it wouldn’t have.

I could have offered to put his underwear in Vi’s dryer, but perhaps wearing it damp would teach him an important lesson about communication.

“I understand. Yes, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Was I trying to convince myself or him?



“Theo only told you about the trip last night?” Vi sounded incredulous. “What a jerk.”

“Maybe he didn’t think we’re serious enough to coordinate schedules?”

“Stop making excuses for him.”

“We haven’t said we love each other or anything.”

“You’ve been exclusive for almost three months. You spend several nights a week together. You do his freaking laundry.”

After he forgot to take it out of the washing machine, I’d been tempted to leave it damp in the basket, but when he’d begun cursing as he battled with my elderly printer after dinner, I’d relented and hung everything up. His boxers had still been damp this morning, though.

“He’s worried about funding.”

“So? It wouldn’t have cost anything to mention his plans. Doesn’t he know how worried you are?”

“He thinks I’m overreacting.”

A pause. “Do you want me to send Dawson back?”

Violet’s offer made my breath hitch. Although she tried to hide how badly the ordeal earlier in the year had affected her, I knew she still relied on Dawson’s strength to keep her steady.

“Don’t do that. I’ll be careful. During the day, I only go to the café, the grocery store, and the gym, and Brax is going to send a driver to pick me up for work and drop me home afterward. He insisted.”

Which was a perk of the boss being a friend as well as the man who signed my paychecks.

“It couldn’t be anyone from work sending the messages, could it? Aren’t they into some weird stuff?”

I’d already considered that. The members of Nyx were carefully vetted, ditto for the staff. And besides, the clients had every kink attended to in the basement sex club. Even though I’d figured it was unlikely one of them was involved, I’d shown Mario’s pictures to a couple of the hostesses, just in case, but none of the girls had recognised his mushroom.

“No, I checked.”

“I don’t like this,” Vi said.

“Neither do I.”

“I’ll text you every hour, okay? I need to know you’re all right. If you don’t reply, I’ll call you, and if you don’t answer, I’ll get ahold of Brax.”

“Do I get time off for sleep?” I asked, but there was a lump in my throat because I appreciated how much she cared.

“You get eight hours. I really wish I wasn’t stuck here.”

Vi was in the Bahamas, a destination that had sounded awesome when she first told me about it. Getting paid to hang out in the sun? I’d been more than a tiny bit jealous. But she’d been filming a murder mystery set around a hurricane for twelve hours a day, and although she made light of the workload, I heard the exhaustion in her voice.

“Why don’t we take a break when you get back?” I asked. “Find an out-of-the-way hotel and spend a weekend drinking cocktails on a beach that isn’t covered in fake broken palm trees?”

“I love that idea. Honestly, I’m counting down the days until I leave this place. Having to pick sand out of everything is driving me crazy.”

I was counting down the days until she left as well.

CHAPTER 6

LAUREN

“Thanks, Hakeem. You don’t need to come inside.”

Hakeem shrugged, but he still climbed out of the car. “Boss’s orders.”

It was night six of Theo’s San Francisco trip, still a month until Vi returned, and secretly, I was glad that Brax was taking his responsibilities seriously. After each shift at Nyx, a car from the service he used took me home, and the driver—usually Hakeem—would wait for me to deactivate the alarm before checking every room in the house, including the closets and the shower stall. The first night, I’d almost died of embarrassment when he’d walked past a radiator full of underwear and a sink stacked with dirty dishes, but now I’d grown used to his vigilance. I’d also spent a whole morning tidying, so at least I’d racked up one achievement this week, even if my word count was non-existent. The constant stress was getting to me. Funny how something as tiny as Mario’s mushroom could knock me off balance for an entire day.

Cristian had started checking in too, and that did nothing for my concentration. Yesterday, I’d been in the gym when Mario’s message arrived, another X-rated photo accompanied

by a single word. *Soon*. I'd stumbled off the side of the treadmill, twisting an ankle as I fell, and Cristian had caught me as I was about to hit the deck. I'd found myself plastered to that hard chest, sweaty and breathing heavily as my heart hammered against my ribcage.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Isn't that my line?"

"You didn't hurt your back, did you?"

"My back's fine. What happened?"

"I tripped, that's all."

"Why did you trip?"

"Because...because..." I wanted to brush the problem off, but one look at those dark eyes and I found myself oversharing again. "I got another message."

"From the mushroom guy?"

"Yes."

Cristian bent to pick up my phone and held it out, one arm still firmly around my waist. "Unlock it."

"Why? I saw enough."

Silence. Heartbeats, his and mine, with mine beating twice as fast. When his stony gaze didn't let up, I unlocked the phone. I'd expected him to look at the message, but before he began tapping away at the screen, he took a picture of us.

"What was that for?"

He didn't answer, and when he was finished, he tucked my phone into the pocket of his shorts.

"You need ice on that ankle."

"What did you do?"

"Do you want to sit in the juice bar or my office?"

"Give me my phone."

"Later. It's past noon—we can have lunch. Did you try the Thai burrito?"

"Not yet."

"Then that's what we'll have."

"What if I don't want a burrito?"

In the blink of an eye, he swung me up into his arms, bridal-style, and everyone turned to look when I squealed. Cristian seemed utterly unperturbed.

"Then you can watch me eat a burrito."

"Put me down!"

"I will. In the juice bar."

"You're an asshole."

"I'm already aware of that. Do you want any sides with your burrito?"

What was the point of arguing? I wasn't going to win. Cristian strode effortlessly across the gym, ignoring the bemused stares that followed us. By rights, I should have felt anger as he took over, irritation that he refused to listen to a word I said. But secretly, what I felt was relief. Relief that he'd

taken charge and I didn't have to watch my back for the next few minutes at least. Cristian was pushy and controlling, but he also made me feel safe. He wouldn't hurt me, and with him around, nobody else could hurt me either.

I relaxed and let my head sink against his chest. *Might as well enjoy the ride.*

My acquiescence was met with a smile that melted away a little of the stress that had built up over the past week. In the juice bar, Cristian deposited me carefully onto a padded bench and then knelt to examine my ankle.

“How much does it hurt? Do you need me to take you to the emergency room?”

“It's just a sprain.” Plus I had to work tonight, but I didn't dare to mention that in case Cristian decided to handcuff me to a lounge chair. “I'm fine.”

“It's swelling. I'll get you an ice pack—don't move.”

“What will you do if I disobey your orders? Imprison me in the spa? Massage me into submission?”

He flashed a rare grin. “Maybe.”

Be still my dancing ovaries. I had a *boyfriend*. True, Theo had abandoned me to go to San Francisco, but he'd kept his word and phoned every morning and evening. Between his calls, Violet's check-ins, and the messages from Mario, I'd never been so popular. Although whenever a new dick pic arrived, I'd gladly have traded my popularity for a one-way ticket to a desert island, a sandy paradise with a comfy hammock and no cell service.

I could send a message in a bottle and then sit back and wait for a handsome stranger to rescue me. Could Cristian swim? I'd never seen him in the pool here, but he'd certainly look good wearing Speedos. *Put that thought out of your dirty mind, Lauren.* Knowing my luck, Mario would show up in a dinghy.

I took a deep breath and waited. We were only having lunch. Cristian was probably worried in case I tried to sue the gym for the fall from the treadmill, that was all. A man like him was a grumpy unicorn, as unattainable as Rush Moder, so I might as well just sit back and eat a burrito. Not that I was hungry, thanks to Mario. If I ever met that jerk, I'd thank him for the contribution to my weight loss right before I junk-punched him. Those burritos didn't contain mushrooms, did they?

Cristian came back with an ice pack and a towel, and he was swiftly followed by a waitress who brought two burritos and a bowl of sweet potato fries. After he'd wrapped my ankle and settled into the seat opposite, I thought we might have a conversation, but instead, he held my phone up to my face to unlock it.

"Can I have that back yet?" I asked.

"No."

"That's all I get? No?"

"I need to see the messages. The most recent ones came by text?"

"Yes."

“And before that?”

“Facebook was his favourite, but he’s also fond of email.”

“Did you keep them all?”

“I deleted some of the earlier ones, but they were all the same format—nasty picture, disgusting suggestion.”

“Today’s message is more concerning. He’s threatening contact. Have you ever replied?”

“A couple of times in the beginning, just telling him to leave me alone or I’d report him, but he must have known it was an empty threat.”

Cristian was zooming in on the photos now, studying them. He must have had a strong stomach.

“What are you doing that for?”

“I’m building up a picture of what he looks like. I want to be certain he isn’t a member here.”

A chill ran through me. “You think he could be?”

“You’ve been getting the messages for months, so it’s unlikely, but I believe in making sure.”

“What are you gonna do? Stake out the men’s locker room looking for tiny mushroom dicks?”

“If necessary. Tell me if you hear from him again, okay?”
When I didn’t answer right away, the corners of Cristian’s lips flickered, that intense gaze spilling over me. My thighs clenched of their own accord. “Or do you like the idea of the massage table?”

This was starting to feel dangerously like flirting.

“I’ll tell you when he sends another message.”

Cristian peeled the foil from his burrito and took a bite. “Good girl.” Then he leaned back in his seat, seemingly satisfied with himself. “So, Lauren Rossi, what’s your story?”

“My story?”

“Your accent says Texas, your skin says you don’t go out much, and those lines on your forehead”—he reached out to trace one with a fingertip—“say you’ve been stressed for a while.”

Three out of three.

“Are you always this observant?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you want to know my life story?”

“I thought women liked to talk about themselves?”

“What if I asked you the same question? Would you tell me?”

A shrug. “Not much to tell. I grew up in San Pedro, fucked around in high school, joined the Marines, left the Marines, then started Planet Health.” He focused on me over the top of his burrito. “Got divorced along the way.”

Cristian had been married? Wow. Who could put up with him for long enough to make it down the aisle?

“How long were you married?”

“Six years.”

His ex-wife deserved a medal.

“Kids?”

He hesitated for a long moment, and I thought he wasn't going to answer, but finally, I got another shrug.

“I thought so once, but it turned out I was wrong.”

Frantically, I put the pieces together in my head. His wife had cheated? She'd told him a child was his, and he'd later found out that she lied? Hot damn, no medals for her. What a bitch.

“I'm so sorry.”

Yet another shrug. He used the gesture as an evasion, a way to avoid fully answering my questions.

“It's in the past.”

So he said, but before he looked away, I caught a glimpse of pain in his eyes. And I found that I wanted to ease the hurt. The only way I could think to do that was to offer him what he wanted—a tiny piece of myself.

“I grew up near Amarillo, then we moved to LA when my dad got a job here. That lasted two years, and his company transferred him to Alaska. Practically the North Pole.” I shuddered. “Do you know how cold it gets there? I'd just turned eighteen, so I found a room to rent and stayed by the ocean.”

“Snowsuits and Ski-Doos aren't your thing?”

“I'm not a fan of frostbite, and besides, LA was home by then. I waitressed a lot, wrote some books, dated a bunch of

assholes, and then met a decent guy a few months ago. If I could just shake not-so-super Mario, my life would finally be on track.”

“He’s going to make an appearance sooner or later. Much as I hate to suggest it, you should consider staying with your boyfriend overnight.”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Much as you hate to suggest it?”

The waitress came back, and this time, she whispered in Cristian’s ear. He rose, sliding my phone across the table as he did so.

“Enjoy the rest of your lunch.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

Can you guess what he did? He shrugged. What else?

“Stop freaking shrugging!”

I barely heard his soft chuckle over the conversation in the juice bar as he walked away.

Cristian Garza was a jackass. A mercurial, confusing jackass. I wasn’t sure whether I liked him or not, but the baser part of me, the cavewoman lurking beneath the wannabe California girl, knew what I tried so hard to deny. If Theo hadn’t been in the picture, I’d have let Cristian throw me onto the massage table and do whatever the hell he wanted.

As he disappeared out the door, I unlocked my phone and checked the messages. He’d replied to Mario. Cristian had sent a picture of the two of us, him standing in front and looking

fierce. Freaking *murderous*. But it was his words that made my chest seize.

If you want her, you'll have to go through me first, motherfucker.

CHAPTER 7

LAUREN

I hated this printer.

And I didn't much like Theo either.

He'd left the stupid machine jammed up with paper, and now I couldn't print the meal plan Kelli had emailed me. I'd tried unplugging it and plugging it back in again, to no avail. Hell, I was too tired for this. After last night's shift at Nyx, Hakeem had checked the house, and the moment he'd left, I'd fallen into bed. But I couldn't sleep. For once, Mario hadn't been front and centre in my thoughts, which would have been a blessed relief if Cristian hadn't taken that position.

Sexy, grouchy Cristian. You'll have to go through me first, motherfucker.

It was him I'd imagined whispering filthy suggestions. Him I'd pictured in my mind as I slid my hand into my panties. Him whose name I'd gasped as I came.

The guilt had quickly followed.

"Work, you dumb thing!" I smacked the printer with the heel of my hand, and it coughed into life.

What was wrong with me? Why was I so unsettled? For years, dating had been easy because every man I went out with was a prick. After endless disastrous hook-ups, my expectations had been low, and when you hit rock bottom, the only way left was up. But now I had two men in my life, one sensible and decent, and the other a self-admitted asshole who twisted me up inside.

Dammit, this wasn't my meal plan; it was Theo's investment presentation. I was about to toss it into the recycling box because it was a bit late now, but then I caught sight of my name. Why was *I* in his plan? And Violet? As I scanned the page, I felt cold. A little numb. Definitely sick.

The executive summary set out Theo's marketing plan, and Vi and I were bullet point number three. *Promotion by Violet Miller (Hollywood actress) and Lauren Rossi (best-selling author)*. What the...? We hadn't spoken about this. I'd never agreed to promote an app, and I didn't even know what it did. I scanned the rest of the pages. Some sort of second-hand clothing sales? Like eBay, but for designer dresses? For every item sold, Theo would earn a commission, and he was forecasting six-figure revenues within three years.

Six figures, with help from his key influencers.

Why would he do this? Although I hadn't yet introduced him to Violet, I had told him how I felt about people trying to take advantage of my friends. And me? I wasn't famous. I'd spent a few weeks on the bestseller lists after one of Vi's TikTok videos went viral and Kane shared it on Twitter, that was all.

Maybe it was just some bullshit for the presentation? Or a mock-up? Could there be an innocent explanation? I desperately wanted there to be. *Needed* there to be, because if there wasn't, it meant I'd been used by yet another man. I'd have to confront him, find out exactly why he thought it was okay to name-drop my best friend, but I was just drained. The events of the past week had left me exhausted.

All I wanted was wine and sleep, but I wasn't going to get either because my phone rang. *Theo*. With his as-promised morning call, the call that I'd looked forward to every day. This morning, I'd have preferred to listen to Mario breathing hard.

"How was work last night? I'm not calling too early, am I?" he asked.

"I was already awake, fighting with the printer."

"Just hit it with the heel of your hand—it works then."

"Thanks, I already found that out. And I also read your investor presentation. Why am I in it?"

There was a long pause. If he'd been Cristian, he probably would have shrugged.

"It's only an idea for the future. I figured you wouldn't mind making a couple of posts on social media after the launch. If I make money, it benefits both of us, right?"

The chills turned to ice.

"And Violet?"

“The two of you are close—surely she’d want you to be happy?”

“Your marketing plan makes it sound as if her participation is a done deal, and you’ve never even met her.”

“But she’s your best friend.”

A best friend whose surname I’d never mentioned to him, so he must have researched both of us.

“I’m not pressuring her to promote an app.”

“Do you want to see me fail?”

“Well, no, but—”

“All you have to do is ask her. I’m sure she won’t mind helping out.”

I didn’t like Theo’s tone. He made it sound as if *I* were being the unreasonable one.

“And if I don’t?”

“If you won’t do one little thing to help my business, I guess it would mean the past three months have been a mistake.”

“Are you serious? You’d dump me because I won’t promote your stupid app?”

“Threadz isn’t stupid.” Theo sucked in a breath. “You don’t even know what it does.”

“Because you never bothered to freaking tell me!”

“Yes, well, you’ve always been too busy fantasising about other men to learn the intricacies of my profession.”

“Fantasising about other men? I’m a romance author—creating hot book boyfriends is literally my job, and you have no clue how much work goes into publishing and marketing a novel.”

“Sure I do—you write porn, and Violet Miller posts about it on her social media accounts.”

That—I channelled Cristian—that *motherfucker*. How could I have been so stupid? *Again?*

“Get the hell out of my life. I never want to see you again.”

“What about my stuff? I left my favourite jeans at your place.”

And I had clothes at Theo’s apartment, but I didn’t care anymore. Screw him and the app he rode in on.

“They’ll be in the trash bags at the end of my driveway. Have fun rewriting your marketing plan.”

I tossed the phone onto the couch and burst into tears. This week—this month—had been too much. All the little stresses had piled on top of each other and broken me. My phone buzzed, and I choked out another sob. I almost hoped Mario did show up because I really needed to punch something, but instead of checking the screen, I did the adult thing and hurled the phone at the wall.

Just leave me alone.

Just leave me the hell alone.



Hammering on the door woke me. I'd finally fallen into a dreamless, alcohol-induced sleep, and when I raised my head off the couch, my temples throbbed with the anger of a woman scorned. I grabbed a frying pan from the kitchen and marched through the hallway, fully prepared to smash whoever had dared to disturb my misery.

“Whoa!” Brax and Kane leapt backward in unison.

“What are you doing here?”

The two men exchanged a glance.

“Violet’s freaking out because you’re not answering the phone,” Brax said.

“It broke.”

“What happened?” Kane asked. “You look terrible.”

I practically snarled, and he wisely took another step back.

Brax curled an arm around my shoulders. “What Kane means, my lovely, is that you seem a little upset.”

“I managed to date another asshole, that’s what happened. Men suck.”

“I won’t try to argue with that. What can we do to help?”

“You can shut Theo’s testicles in a vise and wind it up as tight as it’ll go.”

“Is there anything slightly more legal?”

“Wine? I need more wine.”

Another glance.

“I know a place,” Kane offered. “Want to go get drunk? And when I said you looked terrible, I meant your expression, not, you know...”—he waved a hand—“the rest of you. Did you lose weight?”

Brax gave me a squeeze. “Take Hakeem for the day. He’ll make sure you get home.”

Kane and Brax might have been assholes in their own way, but Theo was in a whole other league. At least they cared. I managed a tearful nod, and Kane tucked a few stray hairs behind my ear.

“We’ll wait here while you change,” he said. “Brax, can you get Lauren another phone? Vi’s gonna lose her mind if she can’t get in touch. I’ll find Tylenol and a glass of water.”

“Consider it done.” Brax kissed me on the forehead. “Does Theo have a key to this place?”

I nodded miserably.

“Then I’ll arrange for new locks to be installed. Forget Theo, my darling. He didn’t deserve you. The right man is out there waiting, and he’ll come into your life when fate dictates it.”

An image of Cristian popped into my head, his expression ferocious as he stared Mario down via a photo. I thought... I thought that maybe the right man had already made an appearance.

And that possibility scared me more than ever.

CHAPTER 8

LAUREN

With several dozen photographers and ten million Twitter users as my witnesses, I was never going to a party with Kane Sanders again.

The “place” he knew turned out to be a yacht. I never worked out whose birthday it was, but they certainly hadn’t skimped on the alcohol budget or the guest list. Sometime around midnight, I’d ended up jumping into the on-board swimming pool fully clothed with Kane and Connor Lowes, another Hollywood heartthrob and reformed bad boy. He was married now, and his wife was lovely, from the little I remembered. She’d passed me a towel after several strangers hauled me out of the water.

Now the pictures were all over the internet. *Real-life romance for Kane Sanders and Lauren Rossi? Has a novelist finally tamed the wayward star of Hidden Intent? They certainly looked cosy last night.* If I recalled correctly, the “cosy” picture had been taken when I dropped a potato chip down my top, and he was trying to shield me from view while I fished it out of my bra. Of course, he’d offered to do it for me, but we’d both known I’d never take him up on that.

True to his word, Brax had let me keep Hakeem all evening, and the driver-slash-bodyguard had carried me to bed in the early hours, then checked every nook and cranny of the house before he set the security system and departed. He'd even left a glass of water and a bottle of acetaminophen on the nightstand. The man deserved a raise.

My phone buzzed.

VIOLET

Saw the pics! Glad you're feeling better :)

ME

I'm not. Head hurts.

VIOLET

Have you taken painkillers? There's a bottle in my bathroom cabinet if you've run out.

DWIGHT EISENHOWER

Bet you can't wait for this.

Mario had sent a picture of himself reclining on a leather couch, holding his mushroom. He couldn't even be bothered to trim his pubes. They sprouted everywhere like a tiny tangled

forest, no doubt full of poison ivy. There was probably a lost species living in there. Some kind of crab, possibly.

ME

Go fuck yourself. No woman's ever gonna help with the job.

VIOLET

Was that meant for me or Theo?

Shit!

ME

Sorry, sorry, it was meant for Mario.

VIOLET

So he didn't take Gym Guy's hint?

ME

I guess not.

I typed out the GFY message again, and this time, I made sure I sent it to the right person. I was done with being passive.

VIOLET

Just be careful.

ME

I'm watching my back.

But the bullet came from the side. If I'd known what was about to hit me, maybe I'd have jumped off the damn yacht and kept on swimming.



I was so over men. On Friday morning, two days post-Theo, I signed up for a ladies-only boxing class at Planet Health. The instructor had been through a bad breakup or two of her own, I could tell. As we practised our left and right hooks on heavy bags, she yelled encouragement.

“Just imagine the bag is your ex. Hit him harder. Harder! Lauren, turn from your hips—it’ll give you more power.”

I left the class buzzed, and also a tiny bit apprehensive at the thought of another encounter with Cristian. Last time, I’d had the safety of a steady boyfriend to fall back on, but now I was unattached with a proven track record of impaired judgment. I also had seventeen messages waiting for me, and I groaned when I saw the phone screen. The new phone screen

—Hakeem had brought a replacement cell, and that had been on my nightstand when I woke up in the morning too.

Of course, Mario had made an appearance, this time reclining on a furry blanket with everything hanging out. But there were also texts from Violet, Brax, and Kane, all saying essentially the same thing. *Have you seen Facebook? If not, it's probably better not to look.*

Naturally, I checked my notifications right away. Had someone caught the potato chip incident from a different angle?

No.

It was worse.

Much worse.

Theo wanted to know whether he was an asshole. The answer was obviously yes, but he'd decided to ask the world by describing our relationship issues—from his point of view, clearly—in horrifying detail.

Am I the Asshole?

I (30M) have been working hard to get a new business venture off the ground, and my girlfriend (26F) of three months refuses to support me. I only asked her to post a review of my app on social media and maybe get her friends to do the same, but she flatly refused and said I was being unreasonable.

At this point, I began to suspect our relationship had no future—not only did her lack of enthusiasm for a project that means a lot to me hurt, but I've also had

to deal with her constant fantasising over other men. She wrote the details down, and some of these were very graphic (see examples).

I ended things right then on the phone, but should I have given her a chance to come around to my way of thinking? It's possible she felt threatened by my imminent success and the prospect of my career overshadowing hers. Am I the asshole for finishing with her immediately?

He'd included photos. Images of my notebook, page after page of my café- and gym-inspired stories. Although I wrote professionally, those were my raw thoughts, my rough drafts. *My freaking name was in them.* And now they were splashed all over the internet for people to read.

My friends.

My family.

The strangers I'd written about.

The bottom dropped out of my world right then.

I hadn't wanted those men. They'd just piqued my interest, had the right look for a book boyfriend, and sparked off thoughts that I could turn into a scene. The only exception had been Cristian. My body craved him, even as my head clanged warning bells. Did he use social media? What if he recognised himself in my twisted words?

Planet Health had become my happy place over the past few weeks, but now I'd have to lie low, probably with copious quantities of chocolate cake and several bottles of wine. No,

not wine. Not after the Kane/Connor incident. I could lie low with diet cola.

More messages arrived with every passing minute... From Macie, from Lucas Collins, from Charlotte at work. How long before Mario got wind of the images? The thought of him reading my innermost thoughts and jacking off as he did so left me nauseated.

I needed to get out of Planet Health, pronto.

CHAPTER 9

LAUREN

My eyes were already prickling as I ran through the gym, heading for the ladies' locker room. But I didn't make it. Instead of reaching safety, I bounced off a fifty-something gentleman wearing blue swim shorts and landed on my ass. Just one more indignity in the soap opera of my life.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Where you goin' in such a hurry, little lady?" His accent told me he came from Texas, and the way his gaze slipped to my breasts told me that he was a sleaze.

"Home. I'm going home."

Or maybe to the Bahamas if I could get a flight, because I really, really needed a hug from my bestie. I ignored the man's outstretched hand and scrambled to my feet.

"Well, don't let me keep ya," he said.

And then he squeezed my ass. He actually *squeezed my freaking ass*, and for a moment, I just stood there open-mouthed as he disappeared into the Spa Zone. Then I saw red. The scarlet of a waving muleta, because I'd had enough. I'd had enough of being harassed and taken advantage of. *Actions*

have consequences, jerk. I yanked the door open, only for my glasses to steam up. Taking them off wouldn't have helped—I was blind as a bat without them, and I'd never gotten along with contacts. But it didn't matter. I spotted the blue shorts and the blurry outline of a body and head attached to them, raised my hand, and slapped the pervert as hard as I could.

“Keep your filthy hands off me.”

“Baby, I haven't even touched you today.”

Oh, no.

My heart stuttered because that wasn't the pervert. No, it was the object of more than one of my filthy little tales.

“Cristian, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. I... Shit.” The tears came, and I sank onto a chair beside the pool. “I didn't mean it. A man groped me, and I thought you were him because I can't see properly and you have the same colour shorts, and I'm so freaking sorry.”

“What guy?”

“I don't know his name. Some middle-aged Texan who came in here right before I did. I bumped into him because... because...my ex said horrible things about me online and I wasn't looking where I was going, and he squeezed my ass. Not my ex, the Texan, even though I apologised, and...ugh. I've just had enough of life.”

Now I sounded like a child telling tales. *Please, sir, someone was mean to me on the internet and then a boy couldn't keep his hands to himself.* I'd been groped a hundred

times when I used to waitress in a sports bar, but I'd never let it get to me the way it had today.

“Come with me.”

Cristian sounded furious, and I couldn't blame him. I'd slapped him for no good reason, and I deserved to be thrown out. Kicked right onto the street. He'd gifted me a membership, and this was how I'd repaid him. But instead of heading for the exit as I'd expected, he took my hand and tugged me toward the steam room, and now I couldn't see anything at all.

“Did you just touch this woman against her wishes?” he asked a wall of billowing white.

A pause, then, “She fell right in front of me, and I helped her to her feet.”

That slimy liar. I might not have been able to see his face, but I sure recognised his voice.

“That's not true. I got up by myself, and you squeezed my butt.”

“I was just being friendly.”

Could I have overreacted? His touch had made me uncomfortable, but what if I'd misjudged his intentions?

“You overstepped, and your membership is terminated, effective immediately.”

Cristian was taking my side? I gripped his hand harder, barely daring to breathe. My old boss at the bar had sided with

the perverts every single time. I'd grown so used to being disbelieved that I'd stopped mentioning the problem.

"You can't do that. I paid for a year upfront."

"Talk to Debra at the front desk, and she'll refund the unused portion."

"I want to speak to your manager, young man. This is unacceptable."

"I own the place. Get out."

"There must be a process in place for this."

"Clause nineteen of the contract says membership can be revoked at management's discretion following inappropriate behaviour. You signed that agreement."

Another voice spoke up from the steam. "You can't touch the women, man. That's not cool."

"Do you want to walk out, or should I get my staff to assist you?"

"You'll hear from my lawyer about this," the man spat.

"I look forward to it."

Cristian held the door open, and a blur in blue shorts marched past, cursing liberally as he went. Only once he'd vanished did I take a shaky breath.

"Are you okay?" Cristian asked as he led me out of the steam room. I couldn't let go of his hand. I had no idea what I might trip over otherwise.

"It's been a really bad week."

“Right.” He turned to face me, and I felt rather than saw him raise an eyebrow. “Mr. Hotly?”

“Oh, hell.” It came out as a whisper, and my knees buckled. “It was just a placeholder name in a stupid writing exercise.”

Cristian leaned in close, close enough that his lips brushed my ear. My nipples hardened instantly, which he probably noticed when my breasts squashed against his chest. Was it possible to die just from thinking about it?

“So you don’t want me to fuck you in the shower? Or over my desk? Or on a weight bench, or in the sauna, or beside the pool?”

I did. I wanted him to do all of those things. Cristian Garza wasn’t the gentleman I’d dreamed of meeting, but he was the man I was drawn to like a moth to a flame. My body ached for him. He was the only man I’d ever written more than one scene for, and he’d starred in my fantasies too.

“If you keep biting that lip, I’m not responsible for the consequences,” he said through gritted teeth.

Consequences. I liked the sound of consequences. I wanted his strong hands, his talented tongue, and the cock that was thickening against my hip. Forget all the careful analysis I’d done in the past about a man’s motivations—where had that gotten me? What existed between us was more primal, a desperate need to have each other in any way possible. I felt it now. I felt what he’d kept hidden and what I’d tried to deny.

Slowly, deliberately, I bit my lip again.

He moved faster than I'd thought possible. A second later, I was in his arms, still half-blind, clinging to his neck as he took me wherever he pleased.

"You wrote about me the first time I walked into that café," he said as he climbed a flight of stairs, a statement rather than a question.

"Yes."

"You wanted me to thrust away inside you, hitting that magic spot over and over until you screamed my name."

"Yes."

"You wanted me to talk filth and fuck you into submission."

"Yes."

We passed a desk, and he paused. "Sheryl, cancel everything for the rest of the day."

"Uh, okay."

Poor Sheryl.

My glasses were beginning to clear now, and when Cristian strode into an office and kicked the door shut behind us, I realised he'd brought me to his inner sanctum. His desk sat to one side of the room in front of a wall of windows that overlooked the Fitness Zone downstairs. This was where he'd spied on me from behind the mirrored glass. Where he'd watched me sweating my ass off for weeks.

The polished surface of the desk was already clear of clutter, and through a door beyond, I glimpsed a private

bathroom. Did he have a sturdy shower stall? I couldn't imagine him installing a flimsy plastic model.

He set me onto shaking legs and circled me, sizing me up like a zoo exhibit. I'd never felt this way before, so nervous with anticipation that I forgot to breathe. If anyone but Cristian had studied me with such intensity, I might have withered, but his gaze was so full of molten lust that I stood tall. He wanted me. This beautiful asshole wanted me, and I wanted him right back. When he'd completed his examination, he pulled out my ponytail holder and fisted a hand in my hair.

“You're mine. Say it.”

“I'm...” My voice came out hoarse, and I tried again. “I'm yours.”

“Good girl.”

Then his lips were on mine, and all the fire in his gaze poured into that kiss. Flames flared in my belly, and I pressed against him, his back muscles rippling under my palms as I let my hands explore. Why had I ever thought Theo was good enough? There'd been no passion. No heat. Cristian kissed like the devil himself—full of desire and energy, a forbidden temptation I couldn't resist.

He lifted me onto his desk and began to peel off my clothes—my shirt, my bra, my shorts—trailing his fingers over my flushed skin as he did so. When it came to my panties, he shimmied them down an inch, hesitated for a moment, then found a pair of scissors in his desk drawer and snip, snip, snipped, leaving me naked before him.

“Hey! Now I can’t wear those anymore.”

“Exactly.”

Perhaps I should have felt self-conscious about all my pooches and stretch marks and bumps—wasn’t that how society conditioned us to act?—but under the harsh glare of Cristian’s office lights with my legion of imperfections on display, I felt nothing but sexy. *He* made me feel that way, his breathing rough as he drank me in, his lazy gaze pausing on my breasts and again on the triangle of hair between my thighs. Maybe I should have taken a page out of fictional Lauren’s book and gotten a Brazilian?

“How come you’re still wearing shorts?” I asked.

He ignored that. “I can smell your arousal from here, Lauren. Spread your legs.”

That was the moment I discovered there were definite advantages to writing down my fantasies and letting the object of my desires read them. Cristian knew what I wanted without me uttering a word, which was just as well because I could barely speak. I did as I was told, trembling from the sudden coolness as he breathed over me.

“Somebody’s ready,” he murmured.

“So get on with it.”

“Patience is a virtue.”

“I’m more into vice.”

Cristian chuckled as he went to work with his tongue, sliding it between my slick folds, fucking me with it, circling

my clit until I forgot my own name because his was the only one that mattered. It didn't take long.

“Cristian.”

I choked it out as the orgasm tore through me, my back arched and my heels digging into his thighs, the rush more intense than anything I'd ever experienced. Now I knew how a junkie felt. I'd spend the rest of my life chasing this high.

Cristian gathered me into his arms, and I wrapped myself around him, undoubtedly leaving a mess all over his desk but beyond caring. I never wanted to let him go. In a break from his tough-guy persona, he kissed my hair and rubbed my back so, so sweetly.

“Better?” he asked.

“Much better.”

“Forget all the assholes who came before me. They're irrelevant now.”

“What...what is this?” I was almost scared to ask. “What are we doing?”

“You didn't study biology in high school?”

“I mean between us. What's happening between us?”

If this was a one-night—one-afternoon—stand, it might just ruin me.

“What's happening? Everything. This is the start.” He feathered soft kisses along my jaw. “I wanted you from the moment I saw you.”

“You did?”

“I dropped my wallet under your chair on purpose.”

What? I leaned back to look at him, but his gaze was unrepentant.

“Why? Why would you do that?”

“So you’d bring it back.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Guilty as charged. But now I’m your asshole, so you’d better get used to it.”

CHAPTER 10

LAUREN

Mine. Cristian Garza was mine. And I was his, not that he was giving me a choice in the matter. This wasn't some stupid rebound fling; this was real. Cristian was the man I should have been with all along. In the beginning of my three-month mistake with Theo, I'd over-analysed everything, made plans and contingencies. And excuses. I realised now that I'd been trying to shoehorn us both into my idea of what a relationship should be like. *Stage one, attraction. Stage two, awkwardness. Stage three, lust. Stage four, reality. Stage five, commitment. Stage six, intimacy. Stage seven, engagement, marriage, kids.* But now I realised how wrong I'd been. Life wasn't a magazine article. When you met your soulmate, things just flowed, unstoppable like a river, and probably with the occasional stretch of rapids to navigate. But there'd be smooth sections too, lazy days spent floating in the sunshine.

Cristian was my river.

And now he opened another desk drawer and pulled out an economy-sized package of condoms. Why were those in there? Did he bring women up here often? The box was sealed, but—

“I bought them for you,” he said before I could go any farther down that rabbit hole. “Going bare is your decision to make, not mine.”

As decisions went, it wasn't a hard one. I glanced at the tent in his shorts. Okay, poor phrasing. Cristian was definitely hard. As hard as freaking granite.

“I take birth control pills, but I've never had sex without a condom.” Even with Theo. Deep down, my subconscious must have known he wasn't The One, even if my brain had taken a while to catch up. “I want to feel every part of you.”

Cristian scrolled through his phone and passed it to me. Test results. He was clean.

“I haven't been with anyone since I got those. I don't make a habit of this.”

The letter was dated three months ago.

“I'm yours,” I whispered.

That was all the instruction he needed. A moment later, we were in his shower, a spacious, two-person stall with polished stone walls, black-and-white marble in a checkerboard pattern. Definitely a step up from Mr. Hotly's plastic box.

Your move, King.

The tile felt cool against my back as Cristian lifted me effortlessly and held me in place, his strong hands under my thighs. Somewhere along the way, he'd lost the shorts, and as he lowered me gently, I guided his thick cock inside me where it belonged. He stretched me, filled me, made me gasp as he settled me into place.

“Okay?”

I nodded, and he pinned me with his hips as he ran a thumb over my bottom lip, freeing it from my teeth.

“This is just so...so big.”

He glanced at his cock.

“Not only that, stud. I mean everything. I...” I closed my eyes for a second, trying to gather my thoughts. “Don’t hurt me. Please, don’t hurt me.”

“I’ll never hurt you.” Cristian laid his forehead against mine. “Lauren, look at me. I’ll never hurt you, I swear.”

This time, his kiss was tender, and I knew he spoke the truth. Cristian Garza wouldn’t be an easy man to live with, and I’d barely scratched the surface when it came to understanding him, but his motives were pure. I was more than a freaking marketing tool to him.

“Stop overthinking.” He already knew me better than Theo had. “Forget the shit outside and focus on riding my cock. I want to feel your pretty pussy clench around me.”

He gripped my ass with both hands, and when he began to move, my mind emptied. All that mattered was him, me, us. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him, our tongues duelling in a battle I’d willingly lose. Cristian was in charge, thrusting as he pulled me onto his cock, over and over, angling his hips so he hit exactly the right spot.

“More,” I begged.

“Patience,” he countered.

But he obliged and lowered his mouth to my breasts, nipping at the pebbled tips until I saw stars. I was lost in sensation, barely connected to my own body as he gave and took at the same time.

“I’m coming,” I choked a heartbeat before I shattered, my head thrown back against the wall as a long moan escaped my throat.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, and in that moment, I felt as if I really was.

Still he wasn’t finished. He lowered me to the floor, then positioned me precisely as he wanted me with my hands on the bench at one end of the shower. Now his thrusts were deeper, and he leaned over me, one hand next to mine and the fingers of the other circling my clit. In the past, I’d always felt like a fraud when I wrote about multiple orgasms, but now I found out I hadn’t been lying. He held me up as my knees buckled, then followed me over the edge with a quiet grunt, spilling his warmth deep inside me.

“Holy hotness,” I breathed.

“You mean ‘Hotly.’ Get a spellchecker, babe.”

A laugh burst out of me. Or maybe it was more of a sob of relief. Relief that Cristian hadn’t been mad about my writing, that he’d accepted me for who I was and embraced my flaws. It was too soon to say “I love you,” but I felt it. I felt the unstoppable rush of emotion, of rightness, the certain knowledge that this was the man I was destined to be with.

“What’s next, Mr. Hotly? Do you want to fuck me in the sauna?”

“That could be awkward before closing time. No, I want your hands pressed against the window in my office and your legs spread. I want you to watch the people down below and wonder just how good the mirror coating on the glass is as I fuck you from behind with those luscious breasts bouncing.”

“Are you serious?”

“You don’t have the monopoly on fantasies, princess. We’re doing mine too.”

I could hardly argue. “Uh, how good *is* the mirror coating?”

He laughed, a deep, throaty chuckle. “You think I’d let you do that if people could see? I don’t like sharing.”

“Could I just take a minute for my legs to recover?”

Cristian planted a gentle kiss on the tip of my nose. “We have all the time in the world.”



Or not.

I was watching Cristian’s reflection in the window, his hips moving against mine, when the knock at the door came. He stilled as I stiffened, and we both whipped our heads around.

Please say that door is locked.

“I’m busy,” he called.

“There’s a lady on the phone, and she won’t take no for an answer. She says her name’s Violet.”

Oh, crap.

“Violet who?”

“Violet Miller? She’s worried about a friend of hers. Lauren Rossi? She said that Ms. Rossi came here this morning, and now she’s not answering her phone. Debra put out a call over the address system, but nobody responded.”

Shit, shit, shit!

“I’m meant to check in with Vi every hour,” I whispered. “Part of my anti-stalker strategy.”

“Ms. Rossi did come here,” Cristian called, somehow managing to smirk at the same time. “Tell Ms. Miller she’s fine. Very fine.”

Asshole. Vi was gonna shriek when I told her what had happened. Hell, maybe I’d even send Theo a thank-you note?

My folds were slick, and Cristian’s fingertip skated over my clit as he did that magic thing with his hips. Below us, the folks in the Fitness Zone were oblivious as they went about their workouts, and the reverse voyeurism gave me a kick I hadn’t expected. Now I understood how the people on stage in the basement at Nyx felt. The heady mix of power and vulnerability was one hell of a drug. I spiralled off the cliff once more, and this time when Cristian sat me on his desk, I was spent. He rested his hands on my thighs as he looked lazily up at me from his chair.

“What happens now?” I asked. We’d moved into uncharted territory, and I had no idea how to navigate.

“You should call your friend, and then I’m taking you out for dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“You think I’d leave you hungry? And you need to decide whether we’re staying at my place or your place tonight.”

I hadn’t realised we’d be staying together at all.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Moving so fast, I mean.”

“Until the prick sending you snapshots of his dick is out of the picture, I’m in your space. After that, we can reevaluate.”

Okay. I took a deep breath. *Okay.* For a few blessed hours, I’d forgotten about Mario and his growing obsession. *If you want her, you’ll have to go through me first.* Cristian hadn’t been kidding, had he?

“Do you have a roommate?” I asked.

“Not unless you count the cat.”

“Aw, you have a cat?”

“I inherited her from the previous owner of the property.”

“Do you live close by?”

He hesitated for a moment. “I have an apartment downtown.”

“Then can we go to your place?”

I was hella curious to see what it looked like.

A shrug. What else? “Sure.”



Cristian sent someone to retrieve my belongings from the locker room, and I borrowed his bathroom for a shower, which took longer than it might have done because he joined me, and so did his tongue. And fair was fair, I wanted a taste too. Guess what? I had a new favourite food.

After that, I womaned up and checked my phone again. Almost fifty messages, but there were only a handful I cared about.

VIOLET

Call me! Please call me. I'm freaking out here.

ME

Sorry! Lost track of time. I was having hot sex with someone who wasn't Theo.

Her reply came almost immediately.

Violet: OMG! Cristian?

ME

;)

VIOLET

Go you! Everyone thinks Theo's the asshole, by the way. And a bunch of women want to know what happens next in the story of Mr. Hotly.

ME

My lips are sealed.

VIOLET

Are they really?

ME

No :)

Next, I messaged Brax, Kane, Lucas, Charlotte, and Macie to let them know I was okay, just terrible at timekeeping, and then I sagged onto the couch in Cristian's office. I still had ninety-nine problems, but for once, a boyfriend wasn't one of them. A challenge, yes, but a problem, no.

Cristian had pulled on jeans—commando—and a T-shirt and headed out to speak with his staff. He'd be back in an hour, max, he'd promised. Make myself at home. He kept his space neat, the colour scheme monochromatic. Spare clothes lived in a closet beside the bathroom, and he had a mini-fridge filled with drinks, but there were no personal touches. No photos, no vacay souvenirs, no calendar filled with notes. The few pieces of artwork were modern and abstract, the rest of the walls bare. He said he'd been married once. Was the tidiness a defence mechanism? Or had he always guarded his personality so fiercely?

I deleted a bunch of messages, and then when exhaustion crept up on me, I closed my eyes. I'd just rest for a moment. Or possibly two...

CHAPTER 11

CRISTIAN

Lauren looked like a goddess lying there on the couch. His couch, his woman. It hadn't taken long for the boyfriend to fuck up, and when he'd played his final hand, he'd done so with the foolish confidence of a drunk poker player. Was he the asshole? Of course he was the fucking asshole.

Everyone in the whole damn world thought he was the asshole.

But who cared about him anymore?

Cris caressed Lauren's cheek softly and waited for her to wake. It took a full thirty seconds, but then her eyes flickered open, her face registering first confusion and then a soft smile when she realised where she was.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"My schedule's completely clear for the next week. After that, it's flexible."

"You did that for me?"

"Until we identify Mario, I'm your shadow."

Cris didn't like the direction the messages were heading in. He liked it even less that Lauren was still receiving them after his warning. But he knew one thing about Mario: he was close. Lauren was a magnet, and once a man got caught in her field, there was no escape. All Cris had to do was hang around with her for long enough to identify the enemy.

He'd studied every photo Lauren had kept, and the human body was his area of expertise. In both his former and current careers, he'd learned to analyse a physique and pick out the strengths and weaknesses. Mario was white, thirty to forty-five, and slightly overweight. Probably an introvert. A loner. His pale skin showed he didn't spend much time outdoors, and if he worked, his pudgy middle suggested he probably sat behind a desk all day. There was a distinctive mole just above his dick, and his pubic hair was dark brown with flecks of grey. In terms of body hair, he had greater than average coverage on his arms and legs. The hair on his head might be solid brown or even a different colour—plenty of men used dye these days, especially in this town.

That description could match a thousand men, but the hands, those were the tell. On his left hand, Mario had a distinctive pattern of three moles near the base of his thumb, and he also chewed his nails.

The hands would be his downfall.

What would happen to Mario when they identified him? Cris still hadn't decided. On the one hand, they could go the legal route and let the cops deal with the issue. On the other hand, Cris really wanted to break that motherfucker's nose.

“Did you mention dinner?” Lauren asked.

“What do you like to eat?”

Unconsciously, she glanced toward his cock, and he caught himself smiling. She didn’t even realise she’d done it.

“I have a meal plan,” she said almost apologetically. “Maybe sushi?”

“I’ll make a reservation. We can swing by your place and pick up whatever you need on the way.”

Mario’s fate wasn’t the only decision Cris needed to make. He still hadn’t made up his mind whether to take Lauren to his apartment or his house. With any other woman, the answer would have been a no-brainer—the house was firmly off-limits. But this was Lauren. She was different. Firstly, there was the incredible chemistry between them, and secondly, Cris had researched her after the initial wallet incident. Lauren Marie Rossi was the best friend and former roommate of Violet Miller, the new darling of Hollywood. She waitressed three nights a week at a private members’ club and spent the rest of her time writing novels. She chose her friends carefully—they included several other movie stars—and she was fiercely protective of Violet. Nothing in her background suggested she was a gold digger.

Should Cris take a chance?

“I don’t need much for one night,” she said. “Do you have a spare towel?”

“I have spare towels. And don’t worry about clothes because I’m planning to keep you naked.”

Fuck it, he was taking her to the house. It had a pool and a sauna, and judging by the notes her prick of an ex had helpfully posted on the internet, Lauren had plans for those.



She actually offered to split the fucking check.

Cris turned her down, of course, but damn, she had no idea. He'd researched her, but she hadn't dug into his background. She got her first clue when he turned his Audi into the entrance of the Canyon Hills Estate, and the guard saluted before opening the gate.

“What are we doing here? I thought you said you had an apartment downtown? Are we visiting someone?”

“I also have an apartment downtown.”

He could practically hear the cogs turning in her head as he put the car in gear and began driving past multimillion-dollar properties hidden behind high walls and perfectly trimmed trees. If he'd had to buy an expensive home, Canyon Hills wouldn't have been his first choice of location, but the place had grown on him. At least it was quiet. And he'd spent enough time sharing a tent in the desert with dozens of other men to appreciate having his own space.

“You live here?”

“I inherited my father's estate when he died.”

Lauren's hand moved to squeeze his. "You lost your father? Cristian, I'm so sorry."

"We weren't close."

His father hadn't been close to anyone or anything except work and—weirdly—Claudia, the Persian cat. Cris's mother had been the second of his three wives and the only one to bear him any children. None of the marriages lasted longer than a year, and all had come with hefty prenups. While Matt Garza had provided for Cris financially as he grew up, emotionally, he'd stayed distant, and their physical interactions had been few and far between. Once or twice a year, when Cris's mom wanted to go on vacation with whatever boyfriend she happened to be seeing at the time, Cris had been left at the house in Canyon Hills, where he'd been cared for by the housekeeper until it was time to go home.

"Still, I'm sorry. Was it recent?"

"Three years ago." Right after Cris's divorce was finalised. Tessie had turned green when she found out, one of the few satisfying moments in the year from hell. "He was a property developer."

Canyon Hills had been his brainchild, a project he'd poured his time and energy into, and Cris had to concede that the man had been good at his job. It was a beautiful place to live. The walking trails, the golf course, the secluded beach... A good place to raise a family.

A family.

After what happened with Tessie, Cris had almost given up on the idea, but now when he looked at Lauren... Too much, too soon, but maybe someday?

He still owned six properties in Canyon Hills and dozens more elsewhere. A management company looked after those while Cris focused on Planet Health. That was *his* brainchild. It was also the only time he'd asked his father for help. No bank had wanted to lend him the start-up funds, so Cris had convinced his father to sell him Planet Health's first home in a private arrangement. Matt—he'd always been Matt, never Dad—insisted on advantageous terms but refused a share in the fledgling business, not out of the goodness of his heart but because he didn't want to be associated with a failure. Cris's greatest accomplishment was being able to stick two financial statements up at the old man before he died—a positive P&L account and a healthy balance sheet. Matt Garza had respected nothing but money.

But that was history. The company was maturing now, and Cris had a good team in place. Another glance at Lauren. He could take time off if he needed to. Give his girl the attention she deserved.

“What about your mom?” Lauren asked. “Does she live around here?”

“She's still in San Pedro.”

With her fourth husband, an insufferable idiot named Randolph Carter the Third. Cris visited for the holidays when he couldn't come up with a good enough excuse not to, but avoided them the rest of the time. Life was too short to spend

with the wrong kind of people. You only got to live each moment once. Every second was valuable.

What was money without happiness?

When Matt Garza had built Canyon Hills, he'd kept the best plot for himself. Solitaire, a name Cris thought was better suited to a movie villain than a house, sat high on a bluff in the middle of a five-acre plot, with views of the beach and the ocean beyond. The gates opened automatically as they approached.

But Lauren's look of horror wasn't what he'd expected.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought you were a normal guy," she whispered. "Just a really, really hot one."

"I am a normal guy."

"You live in a freaking palace!"

Fuck. Maybe he *should* have taken her to the apartment.

"It's only a house."

"There's a fountain in the driveway! The yard's big enough for a pony! I bet you have a damn butler."

"I don't have a butler."

She fanned herself, and when he put a hand on her thigh to reassure her, she just stared at it.

"Princess, I'm a nobody who ended up with a nice home because my absent father felt guilty on his deathbed. Don't overthink this."

“I can’t think at all. Everything that’s happened today... I feel as if I’m stuck in a tsunami, tumbling over and over and over. I’m sorry I slapped you—I should have told you that earlier, but I got distracted by your desk and your shower and your dick. And I’m sorry I wrote those stories about you. I mean, about Mr. Hotly, but obviously that’s the same thing.” She traced a finger over the scar that ran across his cheek. “How did you get this?”

“In a bar fight when I was a kid.” Cris took her hand in his. “I’m a marine, babe. The slap was nothing. And you can write as many stories as you want, but next time, how about you just send them to me instead of waiting for some jackass to share them with the entire world?”

At least she’d started breathing again.

“You really didn’t mind?”

“Did I mind finding out that what you wanted me to do matched up with what I wanted to do? No, I didn’t.” Cris parked the car outside the front door. “Unless you’re into car sex, let’s go inside. I’ll give you the tour tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Why not tonight?”

“Because tonight, I’m gonna show you my bedroom. The rest of the house can wait.”

CHAPTER 12

LAUREN

The past month had been the craziest of my entire life. Three weeks ago, I'd been dating a regular guy, counting dollars and calories like a math geek, and dreaming of a dirty prince who'd sweep me off my feet.

Now I had the prince, who also happened to be filthy, loaded, and insanely protective. Plus I had a sore arm from pinching myself every twenty minutes, although I didn't want to wake up. I never wanted to wake up.

"Where are we going today?" Cristian asked.

He was cooking breakfast.

Barefoot.

And shirtless.

Other than his annoying habit of taking my phone and checking my messages constantly, and the fact that he'd banned me from going to the grocery store alone when I had a craving for grapes late yesterday evening, he was pretty much perfect. Intense, but surprisingly easy to spend time with. And he cared. Two bunches of grapes—one red, one white—had

been delivered an hour after he'd put his foot down about me buying them myself.

“I thought I might write at Café au LA this morning. With all the distractions of Christmas and New Year's, I haven't been there for three weeks, and I miss Macie's coffee.”

The distractions had come thanks to Cristian—we'd spent most of the time naked. Christmas had been spent at Solitaire, just the two of us plus Claudia. A week later, we'd made a brief appearance at the Canyon Hills New Year Extravaganza, held at the local golf club, although we'd skipped out before midnight and toasted the new year in the comfort of his bed. *Our* bed. He said it was our bed now.

“Café au LA? That's the place where we met, right?” he asked.

“Where you tossed your billfold at me while looking hot? Yes. But if you need to work, I can sit in the juice bar again.”

My favourite table now had a permanent “Reserved” sign, or if I preferred, the servers would bring snacks up to Cristian's office. I was getting *a lot* of curious glances. Which might have had something to do with the fact that Cristian wasn't shy about public displays of affection. Everywhere we went, either he had an arm around me, or my right hand was gripped in his left. Always the left. His right hand was his gun hand, he said, words that had sent a chill through me. I'd been trying to ignore the Mario problem in the hope it would go away, but Cristian was taking it *very* seriously. He'd even checked my home security system, a pointless exercise because Dawson had supervised the installation, but

apparently it met with his satisfaction because we'd be staying at my place tonight. Vi was coming home tomorrow morning, and I wanted to be there to see her.

"The café is fine," Cristian said. "They do a good meatball sub, and I can catch up on emails while you work." He slid an egg-white omelette in front of me. "Does that mean you're planning to write a new adventure for Mr. Hotly's dick?"

I don't know why I blushed. Cristian had been nothing but enthusiastic in his efforts to bring my stories to life, although I'd nearly died of heatstroke in his sauna. His freaking sauna.

Pinch.

"Maybe. Do you have a boardroom table somewhere?"

"No, but I can buy one."

Of course he could.

"Don't lose your mind, but I need to swing by the grocery store later to pick up stuff for Vi and Dawson. Their refrigerator is empty."

"You mean *we* need to swing by the grocery store."

See?

"What happens if we never work out who Mario is?"

"We will."

My phone buzzed, and Cristian got to it before I did. Once he'd read the message, he snapped a selfie of the two of us, tapped out a few words, and then dropped the phone back onto the counter.

“Was that him? Was that Mario?”

Cristian shook his head, and rather than his usual thunderous look, he wore a smirk.

“Who was it? What did you do?”

He just shrugged and walked back to the stove as I grabbed the phone and opened the messages.

THEO

Lauren, I realize now that I made a terrible mistake in expecting you to promote the Threadz app without compensation. Can we discuss this over dinner?

ME

You had your chance, jackass. Mr. H.

In the picture, I was quite clearly wearing a man’s shirt, I had sex hair, and there was a hint of beard burn on my chin because Cristian hadn’t shaved for a week. In short, I looked freshly fucked, probably because I absolutely had been. Thoroughly. Twice.

“I love you.”

Shit! I’d blurted it out without thinking, and we’d only known each other for a month. Okay, two months and a bit if

you counted the wallet thing and the flirting in the gym, but definitely not an appropriate amount of time to be getting into the heavy stuff.

“Love you too, babe. You want juice?”

That was it? Cristian loved me, and he just casually tossed it out there, no drama?

“You don’t think it’s too soon for us to say that?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t have said it.” Shrug. “I know how I feel.”

“I do as well.”

“So, when do you want to have the marriage-and-kids talk?”

Was he joking? He was smiling, but I couldn’t be sure whether he was serious or not. There was still so much we needed to learn about each other.

“Maybe we should leave that until next week?”

“I’ll make a note on my calendar.”



“Macie, this is Cristian.”

She stared at him for a long moment. More specifically, she stared at the scar on his right cheek, and her eyes widened.

“Ohmigosh. It’s him? The man from your story?”

Although she'd met Cristian once before when she made him a meatball sub, her bang on the head meant she'd forgotten most of that morning. And I hadn't publicised my new relationship. The only people I'd told so far were Vi, Dawson, and Brax.

Cristian gave her an easy smile. Those seemed to be coming more often now. "My surname isn't Hotly. It's Garza."

"But you're really together?"

"Yeah."

"So you sell bathrooms, huh? Because I have a problem with my shower. I dropped the sprayer thingy and it split, and I need to fix it before my landlord notices. If I send you a picture, could you help me to order a new one?"

I was about to explain the situation, but Cristian just shrugged and said, "Sure."

"He's definitely a keeper," Macie told me.

"I know."

"So, what can I get for you folks?"

"OJ and a quinoa salad for me."

Cristian's arm tightened around my waist. "I'll have a meatball sub and sparkling water."

My whole crew of digital workers was in today, laptops set up and coffee on hand, and I introduced Cristian to Markus, Brayden, and Samantha. Then Joey brought over our food, and Cristian shook hands with him too. This was all so new, but it felt so right. I wanted my friends to like Cristian, and I

breathed a sigh of relief when Samantha gave me a thumbs-up and a grin while he was studying the menu board.

With one exception, life was good. The words were coming, and I had the perfect partner to test out the feasibility of my sex scenes. Hell, Mr. Hotly had even made a few suggestions of his own, and if he kept it up—pun very much intended—I might have to give him a co-writing credit.

As Cristian worked quietly on his iPad beside me, I dared to hope that I might have found my unicorn at last. My prince. All I'd wanted was the fairy tale, and Cristian Garza had swept me off my feet. Screw glass slippers and poison apples—a lost wallet was definitely the way to go, and pumpkin coaches were so last century.

Of course, there was still the small matter of a villain on the loose, but I had a superhero.

Not even Mario could ruin my happily ever after.



“Freaking heck, you look amazing.” The next day, Vi squeezed the breath out of me and crushed several ribs for good measure. Then she looked over my shoulder. “And so does he. Holy crap, you traded a beat-up old compact for a Ferrari.”

“Theo turned out to be more of a bicycle.”

I'd thought riding him was good for me, but when I fell off, it hurt like hell. Thankfully, Cristian had been there to pick me up.

"Don't turn around," Vi whispered, "but he's looking at you in that ridiculously overprotective way that Dawson looks at me. Like he's gonna kill anyone who gets too close. I'm a little scared."

"He won't leave my side at the moment, not until Mario's caught."

"Good." Vi rolled her eyes. "San Francisco? What was Theo thinking?"

"He was thinking that we'd both advertise his stupid app, and he'd end up rich."

"I hope Cristian doesn't have an app."

"He doesn't, and he's already rich. Vi, he lives in a waterfront mansion. And I'm a little scared too—what if this goes wrong?"

"Don't think that way."

Meanwhile, Cristian and Dawson were sizing each other up like two lions unsure whose territory they were in. Finally, Cristian held out a hand.

"Cris Garza."

"Dawson Masters."

"Good job with Senator Presley."

"That wasn't my finest hour."

A shrug. “There wasn’t a US Marine alive who didn’t raise a beer to you that day.”

“Shame the Navy brass didn’t think the same way.” Dawson skewered Cristian with his gaze. “Don’t hurt Lauren.”

“I won’t.”

The atmosphere was frosty to start off with, but by the end of the day, the two men were getting along like old friends. And when Lucas Collins messaged Vi to see if we wanted to come over to his place for “welcome home” drinks, Cristian and Dawson decided they’d go out for beers together instead. Which was great because it meant they were bonding, but also slightly odd considering the way Cristian had stuck to me like glue since we got together. Still, I was glad he trusted my friends. And this morning, he’d left me alone in the juice bar while he went to run a few errands, only for an hour or two, but I’d written an entire chapter. *The Ex Files* was almost finished now, and my dirty prince was gradually loosening up, which was a relief. I loved him with my whole heart, my soul, and every other part of me, but I also didn’t want to be a Siamese twin. Hmm, was that possible? No, I’d researched that once and Siamese twins couldn’t be boy/girl. But you get the picture.

Cristian did insist on driving me to Lucas’s place, though, presumably to check he wasn’t an axe murderer in disguise.

“You introduced yourself as Cris,” I said on the way over. “Everyone else calls you that too. Should I be calling you Cris?”

“You’re not everyone else.”

“Is that a no? You prefer the Fifty Shades version?”

“Fifty shades?”

“It’s a book.”

“About what?”

Oh, sheesh, where did I start?

“So there’s this hot billionaire, and he meets a girl, and they have wild, kinky sex where he ties her up a lot.”

“Do you like being tied up?”

“I don’t know; I’ve never tried it.”

“I’m not a billionaire.” A shrug. “Maybe a quarter of one? I’m not sure—my accountant deals with the money stuff these days. Pretty sure I have some rope in the garage, though.”

“The key part is the kinky sex. There’s also spanking and a fun scene with vanilla ice cream. My meal plan doesn’t have ice cream, but we could try fro-yo.” I grabbed the seat belt as Cristian swerved across two lanes of traffic. “Hey! Where are you going?”

“To the grocery store.”

CHAPTER 13

CRISTIAN

“**Y**ou’re sure he’s the guy?” Dawson asked.

“Ninety percent.”

Markus Steeger lived in a small detached home in Hermosa Beach that, according to the property records Cris’s investigator had unearthed this afternoon, the man had inherited from his mom. The instant Cris had laid eyes on Markus yesterday, the pieces had slotted into place. The man had the right physical attributes, including the distinctive trio of moles on his left hand. He spent time around Lauren. And when she was engrossed in her work, he watched her with a focus bordering on obsession, chewing his nails absentmindedly as he did so. Mario had been closer than she’d ever suspected.

Cristian had planned to visit Markus’s home alone tonight, once Lauren was safely accompanied by Dawson and Violet and some dude named Lucas. But when Dawson had asked earlier how the search for Lauren’s stalker was going, Cris had opted not to lie to him. Dawson protected Lauren like a sister, and a lie would breach the fragile trust Dawson had shown in him as the newcomer to their little group.

So Cris had told the truth, and when he'd summarised the details of his search for Mario, Dawson had insisted on accompanying him for this evening's excursion.

If Violet had been dating anyone but Dawson Masters, former Navy SEAL and all-around legend, Cris would have risked the man's future ire and fibbed, but Dawson could actually be helpful tonight. Cris knew him only by reputation, but that reputation was formidable. He'd been a part of numerous overseas operations, including one that had rescued a friend of Cris's from a hostage situation in Syria. Plus he'd broken Senator Presley's nose. There wasn't a member of military personnel, alive or dead, who didn't think that particular member of the Senate Armed Services Committee was a prick. Presley and his cronies had pushed through so many cost-cutting bills, it was a miracle marines weren't going into battle armed with catapults. The bureaucratic wrangling had been a major factor in Cris's decision not to stick around and finish his twenty years.

But he respected Masters, and from what he'd seen of the guy so far, he liked him too.

"No lights," Dawson observed.

The street outside Steeger's home was quiet, and the two men had crept into the yard under cover of darkness. The subterfuge took Cris back to his military days, when he'd snuck up on the enemy with only one goal—*get them before they get you*. Tonight's task would be easier, but the goal was no less important. At one time, he'd fought for his country, and now he fought for the woman he loved.

“Can’t hear a dog either,” he whispered to Dawson.

After Cris had tailed Steeger home from the café this morning, he’d walked past the house twice, then he’d climbed the hill behind the property and watched the place for an hour. Steeger had been twitchy in Café au LA, constantly checking the door until he came to the conclusion that Lauren wasn’t going to show up. Then he’d drained his coffee and left. Cris had monitored him from the dive bar opposite, sitting among the day drinkers who couldn’t function without alcohol pulsing through their veins. How Steeger had happened across Lauren was still a mystery, but his fixation wasn’t. Lauren was an unwitting temptress.

Perhaps Steeger had dropped in for lunch at the café one day the same way Cris had? Or maybe he’d spotted her on the street and followed her? Whatever, his infatuation stopped right now.

The house was run-down, the yard overgrown, and the roof in desperate need of repair. Bad for Steeger, good for Cris and Dawson. There were no security lights, and there didn’t appear to be an alarm system. With any luck, the locks would be shit too.

“I’m gonna take a closer look,” Cris said.

They’d already discussed the logistics, and both men wore earpieces—civilian models rather than military, but they’d get the job done. Now Cris called Dawson, who was the designated lookout seeing as Cris had significantly more experience at breaking and entering than he’d ever admit. His past was well-hidden, thanks to his father, who’d acted not out

of altruism but because he didn't want his name sullied by a son with a criminal record. Reputation had been important to Matt Garza. Captain Rybecki of the LAPD found himself with a lifetime membership at the Canyon Hills Golf Club, and all records of Cris's single arrest had been quietly lost well over a decade ago. In return for the clean-up job, Cris had agreed to join the military to "learn some discipline."

Was Cris ashamed of his past? No. His motives had been well-founded, even if his actions were illegal. The gang he'd been a member of, the Robin Hoods, had spent their free time relieving the rich of their trinkets and redistributing their wealth to the poor. Who the fuck needed solid gold bathroom fittings anyway?

These days, he mostly adhered to the law, and he redistributed wealth in a different way. Well-heeled folks threw money at Planet Health, and he gave half of his annual income to charity. That still left him with more money than he'd ever spend, but now that he had Lauren, he'd make sure she was taken care of. Not with diamonds and rubies but with love and financial security.

Cris had never forgotten how to pick a lock, probably because he still practised regularly, and he made short work of Markus Steeger's back door. The kitchen was a mess of dirty dishes—housekeeping clearly wasn't the asshole's strong point—and the place reeked of stale Chinese food. Something small skittered across the floor. A mouse? A cockroach? Cris turned on a flashlight, keeping the beam low, which gave him enough light to see by. And holy fuck, he hit pay dirt in the master bedroom. The space was a shrine to Lauren. Her face

was everywhere. Steeger had printed every photograph of her ever uploaded to the internet and stuck them to his walls, and he'd snapped some of his own too. There she was in Café au LA, preoccupied with whatever she was writing in her book of dirty secrets.

The most recent photos were on the right-hand side of the room, and they were also the most disturbing. Her face had been cropped out and stuck onto porn scenes, Steeger's too. Many of the images were truly disgusting, the women chained and bloody.

“Incoming,” Dawson said.

“Is it him?”

“Ten seconds... Yes. Get out.”

“No way. This asshole is sprung. He's sick in the fucking head, and he needs to be taught a lesson.”

The cops wouldn't do it. A stalking conviction was unlikely, seeing as Lauren thought she was friends with the guy. He'd get a slap on the wrist, nothing more. Cris could sue the ass off him in civil court for the dick pics, but Lauren would have to testify, and he didn't want to put her through that. Plus there was no guarantee of success. People slipped through the cracks—Cris knew that from personal experience. Cops could be bought. What if Steeger wasn't appropriately deterred? Even if he left Lauren alone, there was the risk he might fixate on a different woman, and the cycle would start again. No, Steeger needed the ever-loving fuck scared out of him. And Cris was the man to do it.

“He’s approaching the door.”

Good.

Cris waited in the shadows and took a steadying breath as the key rattled in the lock. Lauren had been damn close with her assessment of Mr. Hotly—he *had* fought MMA in his spare time, at least until Planet Health took off and his spare time dwindled to nothing for several years.

When Steeger stepped through the door, Cris propelled him forward into the wall opposite. *Oorah*. There was a satisfying *crack* as the drywall gave way.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He spun Steeger around and followed up with a knee to the balls and six quick jabs to the stomach, then stepped to the side as the man threw up. Dawson appeared and pulled a face as he skirted the pool of vomit.

“Nice.”

Then he twisted an arm behind Steeger’s back and turned him to face Cris. The man was pale as an anaemic ghost.

“This is your second warning. You won’t get a third. I’ll have somebody keeping tabs on you, and if you even look at another woman funny, you’re going to disappear. Do you understand?”

Steeger coughed, and Cris slapped him with considerably more force than Lauren had mustered that day in the spa.

“I said, do you understand?”

“Y-y-yes.”

“Within a month, you’ll leave California. Do you understand?”

“But this is my home, I—”

Dawson twisted harder, and Steeger yelped.

“I don’t give a fuck where you go, but you’ll leave the state. Do you understand?”

“Y-y-yes.”

“If you ever contact Lauren again, I’ll hunt you to the ends of the earth and make your life a living hell. Do you understand?”

“Y-y-yes.”

Cris drove a fist into the man’s side with enough force to crack ribs. Probably his own knuckles too, but he didn’t care at that point.

“Good.”

When Dawson let go of Steeger, the man crumpled to the floor, groaning, the carpet squelching as he landed in vomit. *Guess he might have to do some housekeeping now.*

Cris’s work there was done. Was he worried about repercussions? Not really. Money bought multiple layers of security, and Cris knew how to look after himself and Lauren. An investigations firm was already on the case, and they’d monitor Steeger to make sure he held up his end of the bargain. But Cris had looked into the man’s eyes tonight, and what he’d seen was a coward. A jellyfish. He’d bet money that Steeger had pulled shit like this before, but without having to

face any serious consequences. Today, he'd learned that karma existed.

Cris and Dawson left him in his hallway to consider the consequences of his actions and plan his next career move. It was getting late, and they needed to pick up their women. At first, Cris had been reluctant to leave Lauren with Lucas Collins, but Dawson gave assurances that Collins was a good guy, and Lauren had been happy to see him.

This whole relationship thing was gonna take some working out.

Marriage had been easier, and also a mistake. Back in those days, Cris had still been blissfully unaware when it came to the intricacies of the female psyche—clueless, even—and when Tessie had gotten upset about his upcoming deployment, he'd offered a ring to placate her. It seemed like the best option at the time. A month later, they'd gotten hitched in a small ceremony at the local courthouse, just the two of them and a couple of witnesses. Oh, he'd liked her well enough in the beginning, but never had the depth of his feelings come close to the all-consuming attraction he felt for Lauren.

She was his soulmate; he felt it to his core. His girl, his soon-to-be wife, and hopefully the mother of his children.

Cris's life had been defined by a series of derailments, but things were finally back on track.

EPILOGUE - LAUREN

“If you hate it, change into something else.”

Four months after I became intimately acquainted with Cristian’s cock, I finally got to see him wearing a tuxedo, although he kept pulling at the shirt collar as if it were choking him. It wasn’t. The assistant who’d measured him had declared it a perfect fit. As for me, I was wearing a dress by Ishmael that I’d have needed to sell a kidney to buy if Cristian hadn’t given me his credit card. And I was also wearing a massive freaking diamond.

“I hate it,” he said, “but that dress goes with a tux, not a T-shirt.”

True. The dress was deep red with a silver ribcage stitched to the bodice. Flashy but not slutty, quirky but not too outlandish. Vi was wearing teal tonight, a jigsaw of satin held together by oversized silver stitches. She’d make the gossip pages, that was for sure, but it was her premiere, so having people talk was a good thing. Her public appearances were limited—it was written into her contract—but rather than hindering the movie’s prospects as the marketing director had feared, her avoidance of the limelight had created a mystique

that only made people talk about her more. Her life was a delicate balance, a series of trade-offs between protecting her career and protecting her privacy.

And so was mine. The Mr. Hotly debacle had propelled my latest book to the top of the bestseller lists, and things had only gotten crazier when I was pictured on a beach in the Caribbean with Vi, Dawson, and Cristian, and some enterprising bloggers had noted Cristian's physical attributes and put the puzzle pieces together. Rumour said I blurred the lines between fantasy and reality, and how could I deny it? I was living my dream. My book boyfriend had come to life like a prince riding from the pages, and whenever I wrote another dirty vignette, Cristian was the first to read it and offer feedback.

Day-to-day, we tried to keep a low profile, but no way was I missing the opening night of my bestie's new movie. Vi had spent months last year filming the remake of *The Thing*, and although I'd spent a few days on set with her, this would be the first time I'd seen the movie all the way through.

Claudia stalked into the bedroom and rubbed against my legs, purring. I'd never pictured myself as a cat mom, but she was a friendly thing, always waiting for scratches when I arrived home.

Home.

I'd officially moved into Solitaire, although I still spent plenty of time at Vi's. Cristian had loosened up on the rules a month or so after Mario's pictures stopped arriving. I still called him Mario, although he'd been unmasked now. Another betrayal by a so-called friend. How had Markus done it? How

had he been so nice to my face when all the while he was tormenting me over the internet? Cristian remained cagey about exactly what had gone on with my ex-stalker, but apparently Markus had left the state now, and just in case he got any ideas about returning, a security firm was monitoring his movements. I only hoped he didn't play his dirty tricks on a new girl.

My ring flashed in the light from the chandelier, and a ripple of happiness ran through me as my fiancé shrugged into his tux jacket. Holy heck, I was getting married. Not tomorrow, not next week—although Cristian would quite happily have flown to Vegas—but soon. He'd asked me last Thursday in the juice bar, right after I wrote *The End* on my latest novel. No bended knee, no grand gesture, because that wasn't his style. He'd just slipped the ring onto my finger and said it was time. Then Macie—who'd begun her new job at Planet Health a month ago—had brought my coffee over and begun hyperventilating when she saw the rock, and I'd wondered if I should call another ambulance. Although honestly, who could blame her? Six months ago, I'd probably have fainted myself.

But I'd gotten used to Cristian now. His possessiveness often showed up in the form of gifts. A necklace, a purse, a freaking car. When I told him it was too much, he'd merely shrugged and said it wasn't, and that was that. Tough luck. I was driving a super-cute BMW with all the latest safety features, whether I liked it or not. Maybe he'd gotten the car idea from *Fifty Shades of Grey*? I'd bought him the trilogy, and he'd read the first book and started the second, plus given

me free rein to turn one of his spare bedrooms into a playroom if I wanted to. I'd already ordered a selection of toys. Call it research.

So, I'd soon be Mrs. Garza, and Vi and Macie had already started planning my bachelorette party. Vi assured me it would be classy and lovely, and once I'd have been disappointed by the lack of strippers, but not anymore. Not with Cristian and his magic hips waiting for me at home. And someday in the not-too-distant future, we'd start trying for a family. Once I heard the full story of what his ex-wife had done to him, I'd begun to understand him better. Much of his possessiveness came from fear—he was scared to lose someone he loved again.

But he wouldn't lose me.

I'd finally found my soulmate, and I was keeping him.

WHAT'S NEXT?

My next book will be the third book in the Blackstone House series, *Hard Limits*...

When Indali Vadera runs to LA to escape an arranged marriage, borrowing a friend's identity to stay off her overbearing parents' radar seems like a good plan. As long as she doesn't get close to anyone, her secret will stay safe, and her new boss is an easy man to hate. Mr. Vale. The ass who requires his coffee served at exactly one hundred and forty degrees. But when Indi's friend goes missing, there's only one person she can turn to for help.

There's a reason Braxton Vale hires personal assistants he can't stand. Giving in to temptation could cost him everything. Between running a business empire and fighting with his hopefully soon-to-be ex-wife, he doesn't have time for distractions, but there's something different about this new girl... When Brax's world begins to fall apart, there's only one group of people he can turn to: his former roommates. But they've been keeping secrets too...

For more details:

www.elise-noble.com/hard-limits

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